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Visionary Experiences Examined:
Recent Scientific Studies of Extraordinary Religious Experiences and their Contribution to Spirituality – The Case of the Medjugorje Seers

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Visionary Experiences Examined:
Recent Scientific Studies of Extraordinary Religious Experiences and their Contribution to Spirituality – The Case of the Medjugorje Seers

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This dissertation will make a contribution to debates on mysticism and religious experiences by exploring the neuroscientific and medical studies performed on the Medjugorje visionaries and analyze what hermeneutical contributions these studies make to our understanding of extraordinary religious experiences. In June 1981, in the village of Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina (the former Yugoslavia), five teenagers and one child reported experiencing daily apparitions of the Virgin Mary, visionary experiences. Three of the six visionaries report to continue experiencing daily apparitions as adults. Throughout the past three decades, the Medjugorje visionaries have been subjected to an extensive amount of medical, psychological, and scientific examination, even while experiencing their apparitions. An exploration of the various scientific studies related to the visionaries of Medjugorje adds to our understanding of extraordinary religious experiences and responds to the need for incorporating new, multidisciplinary approaches to the study and interpretation of religious and mystical experiences.

This dissertation will examine the major hermeneutical and epistemological debates surrounding the topic of religious and mystical experiences, tracing the major philosophical developments of the twentieth century. Using a constructive-relational method, this study will present and analyze the scientific examinations on the Medjugorje visionaries in juxtaposition,

for the first time, with the major scholars and hermeneutical discourses focusing on religious experience. This dissertation demonstrates that the scientific studies on the Medjugorje seers make a threefold contribution to this subject: a contribution that is epistemological, hermeneutical, and that strengthens a criteria of adequacy in discerning religious experiences. The scientific studies in Medjugorje challenge an epistemological reductionism that denigrates every extraordinary religious phenomenon, such as visionary experiences, into a pathological or natural category of interpretation. Making a contribution to the history of hermeneutical debates about mystical experiences, the scientific studies on the Medjugorje visionaries point to something more in the experiences that the visionaries undergo through empirical examination of their apparitional phenomena.

This dissertation by Daniel Klimek fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Spirituality approved by Raymond Studzinski, Ph.D., as Director, and by Stephen Rossetti, D.Min., Ph.D., and William Dinges, Ph.D., as Readers.

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Introduction

In June 1981, six Croatian young people (five teenagers and one child) reported experiencing daily apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the village of Medjugorje in the former Yugoslavia (modern day Bosnia-Herzegovina). Three of the six seers claim to continue to experience daily apparitions of the Mother of Jesus over 30 years later as adults. Throughout the past three decades, the visionaries have been subjected to an extensive amount of medical, psychological, and scientific examination, even *while* experiencing their apparitions. Neuroscience has been used prominently, as electroencephalograms have been applied on the visionaries to study their ecstasies, the altered state of consciousness they enter, by observing what is happening inside their brains as they undergo their apparitional experiences. Scientists and journalists have noted that this is the first time in history that visionary experiences have been subjected to such meticulous and in-depth study through modern scientific technology. The results of these studies may not only shine light on the experiences of the Medjugorje visionaries but also on popular theories about past religious experiences and on debates surrounding their authenticity.

An academic debate about extraordinary religious experiences, such as mystical experiences, has emerged in recent decades. The debate has been framed in terms of the relationship between experience and representation. Many constructivist scholars (major names including Steven T. Katz, R.C. Zaehner, Robert Gimello, and Hans H. Penner) have emphasized the role of language, tradition, and culture in constructing extraordinary religious or mystical experiences. This constructivist paradigm challenges the classic interpretation of religious experiences – known as the "perennialist" perspective – promulgated by such thinkers as William James, Evelyn Underhill, and Rudolf Otto. Perennialism argued that such extraordinary

experiences share certain universal and underlying commonalities throughout religious traditions that transcend the idiosyncratic constructions of any culture, language, or time-period. In the 1990s, a new group of scholars, led by Robert K.C. Forman, renewed the perennialist perspective with a "new perennialism" that presented a hermeneutical challenge to constructivist scholars. This "new perennialism" centered on presenting a "pure consciousness" experience, a documented experience of mystical union whose fundamental tenets question the epistemological assumptions of a contructivist hermeneutic.[1] Eventually, after twenty years of debate between the two sides, Forman and coauthor Jensine Andresen published an article calling for scholars of religion to put down their swords in the "methodological war that has been waging between constructivists and perennialists in the study of religion."[2] Instead, they recommended that scholars explore new disciplines of study, particularly research on consciousness, such as cognitive neuroscience and neuropsychology, in order to make methodological progress on this subject. They explained:

> The study of religion will benefit greatly from a more interdisciplinary consideration of how consciousness and subjective experiences, including religious ones, may actively influence, and be influenced by, human physiology. To undergo a vision of any divine form, or even to believe that we are having such a vision, will no doubt effect our heart rate, our blood chemistry and pressure, our serotonin levels, etc. It is high time that we studied how, and how much.
>
> It is time for scholars of religion to leap with both feet into the discussion of consciousness, spirituality, and the role of direct experience as important and creative elements of human religions. . . . We must explore the nature of spiritual experiences in more detail by drawing more guidance from consciousness studies. We must learn how physiology connects with spiritual experiences by increasing research on the biology of religious experience. We must examine the implications of research on the biology of

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[1] Chapter 2 will delve into the details and intricacies of this debate.

[2] Jensine Andresen and Robert K.C. Forman, "Methodological Pluralism in the Study of Religion: How the Study of Consciousness and Mapping Spiritual Experiences can Reshape Religious Methodology," in *Cognitive Models and Spiritual Maps: Interdisciplinary Explorations of Religious Experience*, eds. Robert K.C. Forman and Jensine Andresen (Bowling Green, OH: Academic Imprint, 2000), 8. Andresen's and Forman's article first appeared in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 7, no. 11 (2000), 7-14.

religious experience for views on the 'validity' of those experiences.[3]

An area of extraordinary religious experience which has been empirically examined by cognitive science, as noted, is visionary experience, particularly Marian apparitions, sometimes part of mystical experience and consciousness. Therefore, as a response to Forman's and Andresen's advice, an exploration of the various neuroscientific, psychological, and medical studies related to the case of the Marian visionaries of Medjugorje may add to the understanding of extraordinary religious experiences. Specifically, scientific findings could add to the criteria for adequacy for evaluating and determining the authenticity of extraordinary religious experiences.

This dissertation will analyze the contributions that recent scientific studies make to a hermeneutics of extraordinary religious experiences by employing a constructive-relational methodology that will interrelate both religious and scientific perspectives on the Medjugorje seers' experience. The first part of the dissertation will provide a hermeneutical history of extraordinary religious experiences throughout the twentieth-century. Hermeneutical interpretations will begin with William James, considering his influence on the study and interpretation of extraordinary religious experiences, and will continue to James' contemporary Evelyn Underhill, observing her influence. The hermeneutical history will conclude with an examination of the perennialist-constructivist debate, considering the underlying issues at stake in the discourse and the various implications behind the methodological approaches applied by scholars from each side. The hermeneutical history will also dialogue with the work of modern interpreters who reduce extraordinary religious experiences to natural or pathological categories. Constructive-relational methodology will be applied throughout the section by giving attention to multiple disciplines of interpretation, from religion to psychology and philosophy, considering

[3] Ibid., 10.

both their critique and support of extraordinary religious experiences. Using the constructive-relational method, no one interpretive framework will be given predominance, but the various hermeneutical approaches will be considered to transcend a reductionist approach and form a more holistic understanding of the subject.

An issue that needs to be addressed is the relationship (often an intertwining one) between extraordinary religious experiences, mysticism, and visionary experiences. Frequently it is impossible to study one of these subjects without giving due attention to the other as each is intrinsically connected.

Mystical experiences are recognized as a type of religious experience; [4] theologically, visionary experiences can be traced back to some of the earliest writings on mysticism, specifically mystical theology which, in the Greek and Christian traditions, has for centuries recognized three types of visionary phenomena: imaginative, intellectual, and corporal visions.[5] Marian apparitions qualify in the third category as *corporal visions*, the definition of which we will explore in depth in the first chapter. Therefore, having their roots in mystical theology, discourses on visionary experiences such as Marian apparitions cannot avoid the subject of mysticism.

We will see in the first chapter how both William James and Evelyn Underhill use discourses on mysticism. James, for his part, uses the language of "extraordinary religious experiences" and "mystical experiences" rather interchangeably, not worrying about a clear distinction but offering a broad definition of experience. In this regard, it is impossible to focus

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[4] Ann Taves explains: "Many philosophers of religion with an interest in religious experience recognize a variety of different types of religious experience, but two types—mystical and numinous—are frequently singled out for attention." See Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 20.

[5] Chapter 1 tackles the nuances of these threefold visionary categories in depth.

on James' influential understanding of extraordinary religious experiences without having to focus the discussion on mysticism. It is further noteworthy that altered states of consciousness—such a key feature of extraordinary religious experiences (what James phrases as "mystical states of consciousness")—constitute a core characteristic of James' hermeneutic. Underhill, similarly, studies visionary experiences and other such extraordinary religious phenomena (including voices – or auditory phenomena) under the umbrella of "mysticism," as she acknowledges that mystics throughout history have recorded experiencing visions, apparitions, and voices or locutions. Underhill's study is essential to our discourse of visionary experiences as Underhill outlines, in impressive detail, the variations and intricacies of visionary phenomena, providing an explanation of the multidimensional manner in which visionary experiences are encountered.

The dissertation will then provide a brief history of the apparitions in Medjugorje, providing the context for the scientific studies on the visionaries. The various scientific data will then be examined, presenting the procedures and results of studies that have been conducted on the seers throughout the years.

The third part of the dissertation will constructively relate the various scientific studies on the Medjugorje visionaries with the epistemological discourses about extraordinary religious experiences that were mapped out in part one, considering what academic contributions these studies can make to a hermeneutical understanding of extraordinary religious experiences.

Medjugorje constitutes a very unique phenomenon in being a modern case of extraordinary visionary experiences that have been empirically investigated with advanced medical, psychological, and scientific studies *while transpiring*. The results of such a unique case study can make a significant contribution to the philosophical, methodological, and hermeneutical understanding of extraordinary religious experiences. This will be the first time

that the scientific studies in Medjugorje will be placed into conversation with eminent thinkers who have written about extraordinary religious experiences.

Chapter 1
William James and the Study of Mysticism

Mysticism is a broad, complex, and often ambiguous term whose understanding and definition has been altered, modified, and developed throughout religious history, often contingent on the historical context of the usage. We will explore popular meanings of the word in a subsequent section. For now, however, let us consider a hermeneutical understanding of the concept that was fashioned by one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth-century on the subject.

It is universally acknowledged by scholars of religious experience, even those who disagree with his hermeneutical approach, that no one had a greater impact on the study of mysticism in the twentieth-century than the Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James (1842-1910). James' classic work on the subject is *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature.* The book was published in 1902 and was based on his Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh.[1] Harvey Egan notes that James' groundbreaking book "has, in fact, influenced to some extent almost every noteworthy contemporary study of mysticism."[2] G. William Barnard explains that James is considered "one of the founding fathers of the academic study of mysticism,"[3] noting that almost "every contemporary scholarly text on mysticism acknowledges James' importance to the field. . . ."[4] The editors of a recent study on Christian mysticism further corroborate the fact, noting:

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[1] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York, NY: Library of America Paperback Classic, 2010), xii.
[2] Harvey D. Egan, S.J., *What Are They Saying about Mysticism?* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1982), 6.
[3] G. William Barnard. *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 1.
[4] Ibid., 1.

"Without doubt, the father of the modern study of mysticism is William James."[5] The Jesuit scholar William Harmless emphasizes what an eclectic influence James' study has had, explaining that it "helped put mysticism on the academic map, sparking a spate of scholarly studies in psychology and physiology, sociology and history, literature and philosophy. Not all agreed with James's analysis of this or that question, but his study set a clear trajectory in the modern study of mysticism."[6]

James' study of religion was unique for many reasons, perhaps most prominently for the methodological decision that James made to refocus attention away from theology, dogma, doctrine, or any form of institutional religion, and concentrate, instead, on direct experientialism, using not theological or doctrinal abstractions but the human person as a "document" of study—the *documents humains*, James called the approach.[7] Concentrating on accounts of extraordinary religious experiences of individual persons, thus the mystical elements of faith, James believed that he was reframing the emphasis onto the truest and most important aspect of religion, essentially the founding principle of all religions: the experience of the transcendent. Ann Taves highlights the widespread influence that resulted from James' methodological emphasis on extraordinary experiences:

> In privileging sudden, discrete authenticating moments of individual experience (such as revelations, visions, and dramatic conversion experiences) over ordinary, everyday experience or the experience of groups, he introduced a bias toward sudden, individual experience that not only shaped the contemporary Western idea of religious experience but also related concepts such as mysticism and spirituality as well.[8]

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[5] Louise Nelstrop, Kevin Magill, and Bradley B. Onishi, *Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 3.
[6] William Harmless, S.J., *Mystics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 14.
[7] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 12.
[8] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 5.

Taves' point is important on a few levels. One is her emphasis that James had a significant hermeneutical influence on the very understanding of the concept *mysticism*, connected directly to individual experience. The word "mysticism" is often interpreted in modern discourse as a term denoting experience, particularly immediate and extraordinary religious experience. This is much different from the various ways that *mysticism* has been interpreted and understood by Christians from early centuries. While the late-medieval form of mysticism was closely in line with James' experientialist bent, earlier interpretations of Christian mysticism had more of a liturgical, apophatic, and even exegetical understanding: Origen was the first to use the word – *mystical* – in a Christian context, doing so exegetically in identifying a "mystical sense" of Scriptural interpretation.[9] James' emphasis on unmediated experience played no small role in advancing a modern understanding of the concept.

Expounding on a definition of mysticism, James designated four marks which states of mystical consciousness possess: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity.[10] By using the terminology of "mystical consciousness" James was framing the mystical experience as being a state of an altered consciousness. In formulating his definition, James acknowledged that the concepts "mysticism" and "mystical" have an ambiguous history, often being used in their contemporary context in a pejorative way; thus, he was aiming for a purer, more useful and constructive definition.

> The words "mysticism" and "mystical" are often used as terms of mere reproach, to throw at any opinion which we regard as vague and vast and sentimental, and without a

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[9] See Louis Bouyer, "Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word," in Richard Woods, ed., *Understanding Mysticism* (New York: Image Books, 1980), 42-55. See Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 146-147. Also Richard Kieckhefer, while applying it himself to describe the experiences of rapture and revelation in his work on medieval mystics, agrees that the "term 'mysticism,' more familiar in modern scholarly parlance than it would have been to the [medieval] mystics themselves, can mean various things." See Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); esp. useful is Kieckhefer's discussion on the numerous forms of mystical experiences on pages 150-179.

[10] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience,* 342-343.

> base in either facts or logic. For some writers a "mystic" is any person who believes in thought-transference, or spirit return. Employed in this way the word has little value: there are too many less ambiguous synonyms. So, to keep it useful by restricting it, I will do what I did in the case of the word "religion," and simply propose to you four marks which, when an experience has them, may justify us in calling it mystical for the present lectures.[11]

Let us consider James' four marks of mysticism with some detail, beginning with the first.

1. Ineffability.

   "The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative," James writes.[12] By "negative" James means that the state has an *apophatic* quality; it defies expression. In other words, the mystical experience is so powerful and sublime that it transcends the capacity to be expressed or communicated by language, concepts, logic, or any human faculty. Here, with mysticism, we are not dealing with a subject that is encapsulated by the limitations of reason but encompasses the transcendent elements of revelation. Interestingly, in this sense, James stresses the importance of *understanding*, as being regulated only to the one who has a direct experience. "It follows from this that its [mysticism's] quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others."[13] James emphasizes that no one "can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists."[14] To push this point with poetic quality, James compares it to the state of being in love, or to the person who has a musical ear and can, therefore, truly appreciate a beautiful symphony for what it is. He emphasizes how inadequate the understanding of such things is to those with

[11] Ibid., 342.
[12] Ibid., 343.
[13] Ibid., 343.
[14] Ibid., 343.

experiential deficiency. “Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly, and are even likely to consider him weak-minded or absurd. The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experiences an equally incompetent treatment.”[15]

2. Noetic Quality

   The second mark means that the mystical state is also one with infused knowledge, bringing with it “illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain.”[16] Interestingly, James notices that this revealed knowledge carries a “curious sense of authority” afterwards for the person who experiences the mystical state, as it is something perceived to come from above, from a higher source and thus from a greater authority. Once again, as with the mark of ineffability, James emphasizes how this state transcends the limitations of reason, of the intellectual faculties; for the wisdom revealed through mystical states originate from a deeper dimension. “They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect.”[17]

3. Transiency

   James articulates in his third mark that mystical states cannot be sustained for long. He stresses that there may be rare exceptions but that, most of the time, half an hour or (at most) an hour or two seem to be the duration of such states.

4. Passivity

[15] Ibid., 343.
[16] Ibid., 343.
[17] Ibid., 343.

With the fourth mark, James emphasizes that the person who experiences a state of mystical consciousness usually feels a suspension of the will, as if an external force has taken over, "sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power."[18] Hence, what transpires is a *gift*, a grace that comes from Another Source. Explaining this mark, James makes an interesting distinction with other phenomena. He considers that the peculiarity of having one's will suspended during a mystical state "connects mystical states with certain definite phenomena of secondary or alternative personality, such as prophetic speech, automatic writing, or the mediumistic trance."[19] However, James sees an important distinction of discernment between such phenomena and the mystic state. Something like a mediumistic trance or automatic writing can be simply "interruptive," the person experiencing it having no recollection of the phenomena afterwards, "and it may have no significance for the subject's usual inner life. . . ."[20] By contrast, mystical states are "never merely interruptive. Some memory of their content always remains, and a profound sense of their importance. They modify the inner life of the subject between the times of their reoccurrence."[21] James ends the explanation, however, by warning that there is a lot of grey area between such phenomena and that admixtures of qualities do exist, making sharp divisions difficult to always discern.

By emphasizing that mystical states modify the inner lives of their subjects James was articulating the major basis for his process of discerning authentic inspiration from false. How does one discern a true mystical experience from a false one? James applied the centuries-old

[18] Ibid., 344.
[19] Ibid., 344.
[20] Ibid., 344.
[21] Ibid., 344.

method, first articulated by Jesus in the Gospels, that a tree is known by its fruit.[22] Thus, the authenticity of a mystical encounter can be discerned by the fruits that it produces, particularly in the life of the person who undergoes the experience. As we will see in a future chapter, this indication of discernment constitutes one of the major guidelines that the Catholic Church uses to distinguish between authentic and false revelations.

James noticed, throughout the numerous cases of extraordinary experiences that he studied, that those persons who encountered a genuine mystical state of consciousness were significantly transformed by the experience. The fruits of such transformation can include greater courage, charity, inner peace, invulnerability, and a deep desire for a pure and holy life. James was so convinced by the fruits of genuine mysticism in having the power to transform a life toward deeper holiness, sacrifice, and purity that he dedicated five of his Gifford lectures to the topic of saintliness.[23]

Interestingly, in studying the fruits of such experiences, James also challenged a popular preconception that has, perhaps too often, plagued the reputation of mystics and the value of mysticism. James confronted the issue of whether such intense focus on the interior life takes away from the exterior life. In other words, is the life of the mystic at odds with the life of practical activism? Does such dedicated concentration on mystical consciousness take away from the necessary attention that normal (wakeful) consciousness deserves? Does the mystic isolate himself in a secluded, interior world that distances him from active participation in the "real world," so to speak?[24]

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[22] Ibid., 373.

[23] These included lectures XI, XII, XIII, titled "Saintliness," and lectures XIV and XV titled "The Value of Saintliness." See James, *op. cit*., 239-298 and 299-341.

[24] Here the usage of the phrase "real world" in quotations is specific and meant to denote irony, particularly in this subject, as most mystics would consider the interior life as that which is dedicated to the truer (and, thus, more "real") world, the higher reality.

Destroying the stereotype, James highlighted the example of the great Spanish mystics: Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross. These three sixteenth-century saints, masters in spirituality and mysticism, all of whom reported personally encountering extraordinary mystical experiences, also led incredibly active lives which, in many ways, have worked to renew the Church and transform much of the world. Ignatius, of course, was the founder of the Society of Jesus. The Jesuit missions, spreading Christianity and culture throughout the ends of the earth, have become legendary, as has the Society for its spiritual and intellectual prowess. Teresa and John, the great reformers of the Carmelite order and founders of numerous monasteries, were also instrumental in leading the renaissance of the Catholic Reformation in modern Europe when Protestantism was spreading throughout the Continent. The two are likewise known as contributing to the golden age of Spanish literature with their writings. All three mystics led very active lives that were instrumental in affecting the Church and the world. The most important point here, which James stresses, is that the energy, activism, and ingenuity of these mystics cannot be separated from their mysticism, but is, in fact, a product of it, the fruit of their interior lives. Thus, it is the interior, spiritual encounter which provides the energy, capability, and desire to influence and transform the exterior world.

"The extremely dynamic, useful, practical, creative lives of so many of the great mystics impressed the father of American pragmatism," Harvey Egan highlights. "The fruits of the mystics' lives, the great benefits to society which flowed from the great active mystics, proved for James the great value of the mystical life."[25] In James' writings this is evident, and obviously this appeals to James' philosophical disposition as a pragmatist; for him, true mysticism inspired a vibrant pragmatism.

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[25] Egan, *What Are They Saying about Mysticism?*, 9.

"Saint Ignatius was a mystic," writes James, "but his mysticism made him assuredly one of the most powerfully practical human engines that ever lived."[26] James underscores that the Spanish mystics were souls who underwent some of the deepest, most ecstatic, extraordinary religious experiences ever recorded, and that it is these experiences which allowed them to be such influential catalysts of inspiration and transformation. "The great Spanish mystics, who carried the habit of ecstasy as far as it has often been carried, appear for the most part to have shown indomitable spirit and energy, and all the more so for the trances in which they indulged."[27]

James' observations about the Spanish mystics are important for a couple of reasons. 1) They reiterate James' hermeneutic of discernment that true mysticism is known by its fruits; and 2) they challenge the pervasively present, albeit often contradicted, belief that mystics remove themselves from the world, as if mysticism constitutes a form of escapism from reality. On the contrary, James points out that authentic mysticism has often shown the opposite to be true: it leads to an enhanced participation in the active life. Here Mary and Martha, as the Gospel example goes, are not at odds, but become a model of unity: enforcing a mutual life of contemplation and action. James was not alone in this assessment.

Evelyn Underhill, whose work on mysticism we will observe in greater detail in the following section, wrote:

> All records of mysticism in the West, then, are also the records of supreme human activity. Not only of "wrestlers in the spirit" but also of great organizers, such as St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross; of missionaries preaching life to the spiritually dead, such as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Ignatius Loyola, Eckhart, Suso Tauler, Fox; of philanthropists such as St. Catherine of Genoa or St. Vincent de Paul; poets and prophets, such as Mechthild of Magdeburg, Jacopone da Todi and Blake, finally, of some immensely virile souls whose participation in the Absolute Life has seemed to force on them a national identity. Of this St. Bernard, St. Catherine of Siena, and Saint Joan of Arc

[26] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 373.
[27] Ibid., 373.

> are the supreme examples. "The soul enamoured of My Truth," said God's voice to St. Catherine of Siena, "never ceases to serve the whole world in general."[28]

Similarly, emphasizing like James that the mystics' experiences do not lead to an inward form of escapism but provide the inspiration for great pragmatic achievements, William Harmless writes about the late-medieval German mystic and visionary Hildegard of Bingen: "Hildegard's experiences, which she routinely described as 'mystical,' as offering 'mystical knowledge' or 'mystical secrets,' led her more outward than inward. They prompted her to create a vast body of work: theological texts, illuminations, music, drama, and much else."[29]

Union is another major component of James' understanding of mysticism. Here we can even see a reason as to why James' study was so unique. Unlike many intellectuals of his time, James did not dismiss the integrity of mystical experiences, or succumb to reductionism, but emphasized that such experiences constitute an encounter – a *union* – with something "more," something that psychology or any natural science cannot fully explain. Egan notes how unique James' work as a psychologist studying mystical experiences was compared to predominant psychological studies on mysticism which hoped to denigrate the subject into pathological or (at best) natural categories of interpretation:

> Past psychological studies of mystical phenomena have frequently reflected an unusually strong hostility toward religion. These studies, moreover, often attempted to explain mysticism away by reducing it to deviant behavior, repressed eroticism, madness, mental illness, regression to infantile states, or an escape from the problems of daily life. The older psychology tended to label the great mystics of the Eastern and Western traditions as misfits, deviants, lunatics, and the victims of self-hypnosis and auto-suggestion.[30]

By contrast to such pejorative treatments, James took religious experiences seriously as a psychologist, using a methodological approach that considered the mystery and integrity of such

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[28] Underhill, *Mysticism*: *A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Aziloth Books, 2011), 138; first published in 1911.
[29] Harmless, *Mystics*, 67.
[30] Egan, *What Are They Saying about Mysticism?*, 6.

experiences while applying psychological categories and concepts to evaluate and study the phenomena, reaching an impressive balance. Anne Taves explains: "Indeed, his aim as a psychologist was to explain religious experience in psychological terms, while at the same time leaving the possibility that it pointed to something more."[31] Egan emphasizes the impact that this hermeneutic had in contrast to dismissive psychological takes on mysticism: "Perhaps no book in this [twentieth] century has done more to render psychology benevolent to mysticism and religion than William James' classic on psychology of religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*."[32]

James was critical of a rationalistic skepticism that presupposes to be the basis of all truth while eliminating other possibilities, in this case, eliminating other states of consciousness. The mystical consciousness challenges the limitations of rationalism, James argued, showing that rationalism only constitutes one order of consciousness.[33] Thus, James was challenging an Enlightenment-influenced mentality which articulates that what is factual or true is only that which is empirically observable through the senses. Here James was grappling with an epistemological issue that predated psychology and was based in philosophy, particularly philosophies of knowledge and religion.

"In part, James was reacting to rationalist theories of religion; particularly that of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)."[34] This is important to consider, and Kant's influence will be observed in greater detail later, as Kant's theories on religious experience have had a large impact on many contemporary scholars, crafting much of the modern debate around mysticism and its interpretations. G. William Barnard points out that "so many of the contemporary

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[31] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 5.
[32] Egan, *What Are They Saying about Mysticism?*, 6.
[33] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience,* 381, 385-386.
[34] Nelstrop, Magill, and Onishi, *Christian Mysticism*, 4.

understandings of the dynamics of mystical experience are, on the face of it at least, indebted to Kant. . . ."[35] The emphasis of this Kantian epistemology was, again, based on a highly rationalistic conception of knowledge which restricted human understanding to that which is empirically observable by the senses:

> According to Kant, only the accuracy of knowledge claims that rely on the evidence of the senses can be analyzed properly. Religious beliefs and experiences, by contrast, have no distinct sensory content. They refer only to supernatural objects, and, as such, Kant regarded such beliefs as having practical consequences only. This means, strictly speaking, that we cannot *know* that God exists. This is because claims to know God are not based on sensory experience. However, we can act out morally commendable lives *as if* there were a God.[36]

Against such an epistemological framework, restricting knowledge to sensory perception, James "postulates of a faculty in human beings that is deeper than the senses – which allows an intuitive grasp of reality beyond that which the evidence of our senses can provide."[37] It is this faculty which James refers to as the mystical consciousness.[38]

Interestingly, James' identification of a human faculty that is deeper than the senses has a strong *etymological* connection to the word *ecstasy*, so prominent in discourses on mystical and religious experiences. *Ecstasy*, in the original Greek, is a word that denotes a coming "out of the self," or outside of the senses.[39] Christian mysticism scholars Amy Hollywood and Dyan Elliot have shown that such an understanding is even present in the work of prominent medieval theologians using Latin, like Thomas Aquinas, William of Auvergne, and Alexander of Hales, who "frequently use the terms 'rapture,' 'ecstasy,' and 'alienation' or 'departure of the mind' (*alienatio mentis* or *excessus mentis*) 'to connote the alienation from the senses that occurs

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[35] Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 116.
[36] Nelstrop, Magill, and Onishi, *Christian Mysticism*, 4.
[37] Ibid., 4.
[38] Ibid., 4.
[39] The Greek term *ekstasis*, formed of *ek*, meaning "outside" or "beyond," and *stasis*, meaning "standing" or "stature," connotes a standing outside or beyond the self.

during an encounter with a higher spirit'."[40] Here we see a direct connection to James' understanding of mystical consciousness. It is a state that transcends the human senses, pointing to a deeper faculty of perception (therefore, signifying "an alienation of the senses" or a "departure of the mind"), and it is a state that denotes union with something "more" – a common phrase for James throughout his *Varieties* lectures (therefore, paralleling "an encounter with a higher spirit").

For James, the mystics experienced a union with something "more," a union which produced deep feelings of inner peace, joy, invulnerability, energy, expansion and freedom (great fruits).[41] This experience constituted an altered state of consciousness, one that transcends the rational faculties and delves into the depths of a deeper dimension. Interestingly, unlike medieval theologians who saw this encounter to be one "with a higher spirit," which could pertain to the Holy Spirit or any of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, James did not specify the theological content behind the something "more" that the mystics encounter, thus allowing the experience to be pluralistic and ecumenical in interpretation. "The mystic's experience of union is mysticism's salient feature, according to James. Union with the Absolute and awareness of this union 'is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition hardly altered by differences of clime or creed'. . . . The mystic considers what he experiences to be somehow ultimate."[42] Thus, James did not claim that mystical experiences prove any one creed, religion, or theology, but emphasized that persons from all the major religions have recorded similar experiences, of ecstasy and union with an

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[40] Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 245. Hollywood cites Dyan Elliot's work in her book, from which the quotation stems. For Elliot's original piece, see Dyan Elliot, "The Physiology of Rapture and Female Spirituality," in *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body*, eds. Peter Biller and A.J. Minnis (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 1997), 141-174. It is on page 142 of Elliot's article from which the cited sentence originates.
[41] Egan, *What are They Saying About Mysticism?*, 9.
[42] Ibid., 8.

ultimate or Absolute, even providing examples from various religious traditions in his lectures. James writes:

> This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed. In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think, and which brings it about that the mystical classics have, as has been said, neither birthday nor native land. Perpetually telling of the unity of man with God, their speech antedates languages, and they do not grow old.[43]

Here we see the formulations of a perennialist philosophy. Perennialism, so influential in the early-twentieth century study of mysticism and religious experiences, articulates that genuine extraordinary experiences share similar, underlying themes across countries, cultures, religions, and languages, transcending constructed boundaries through a unifying, mutually-encountered, spiritual experience.[44] The opposite of perennialism, its hermeneutical rival, or its inversion, is *constructivism*, so influential in the latter half of the twentieth century. Constructivism articulates that there is no such thing as a direct, unmediated mystical experience but that each experience is mediated and constructed through the individual's pre-existent cultural, religious, or linguistic knowledge and beliefs.[45] Thus, rather than seeing it as a pure, immediate spiritual experience, as perennialists do, constructivists see such experiences as mediated and constructed by the human mind. It should be noted, however, that notwithstanding the general principles of these

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[43] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 378.

[44] The best representations of modern perennialism, or "neo-perennialism," reviving the classic interpretation, are two works edited by Robert K.C. Forman: *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) and *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). In addition to these books, which include essays from various contemporary perennialist scholars, Forman has also personally authored a book on these issues, particularly the perennialist-constructivist debate, called *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

[45] Steven T. Katz is the main proponent of the constructivist view in regard to the study of mysticism. He has edited two of the earliest influential books on the subject, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) and *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

hermeneutical frameworks, there are different degrees of both perennialism and constructivism, a reality that we will delve into in the next chapter by observing the nuances behind these interpretative paradigms.[46]

While James, as a perennialist, sees a unifying quality between the mystical experiences that practitioners from various religious traditions receive, he is sensitive enough to consider theological differences between traditions in understanding such key concepts as *mystical union*. Egan explains it thus: because "the mystic in some traditions claims to become the Absolute, James stresses the pantheistic, monistic, optimistic, and conversion traits of mystical consciousness. Since Christians speak of unity, not merging, with a personal God, however, James distinguishes Christian mysticism from a 'naturalistic pantheism'."[47] James noticeably does not use mystical experiences to verify the teachings or dogmas of any one religion, but acknowledges their universal presence within all the major faiths while stressing the obvious existence of theological differences.

In James' understanding of mystical consciousness, a final issue that deserves attention is the question of authority. What authority did William James attribute to such extraordinary experiences? This matter constitutes an essential feature of James' hermeneutic on religious experiences. Let us, therefore, consider his answer.

James divided his answer into three parts. The first explained that mystical states, "when well developed," have the right to be "absolutely authoritative" over the person who experiences

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[46] Robert Forman, for example, identifies at least two forms of constructivism, "complete constructivism" and "incomplete constructivism," while William Parsons sees three "subtypes" or "models" of perennialism, the "perennial invariant" model, the "perennial variant" model, and the "typological variant" model. See Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, 13; see Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 113.
[47] Egan, *What are They Saying about Mysticism?*, 8.

them.[48] The second part, however, enunciated that no authority comes out of such states which should make them binding to outsiders, those who have not experienced them. Only the one who experienced the phenomenon has the right to call it authoritative. No one else, according to James, has a duty or obligation to abide by the revelations given by these states. The third part articulated that which we have already touched on: the epistemological issue that mystic states "break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness." Therefore, mystic states challenge the epistemological rationalism that reduces knowledge to nothing but sense perception. Mystic states show such modes of perception to be only one kind of consciousness and, therefore, open the possibility to "other orders of truth."[49] Thus, our everyday state of wakeful consciousness constitutes only one state of consciousness, and we should not narrowly reduce all knowledge to this single perception, James argued, challenging the rationalistic, Kantian paradigm.[50]

While James' work on mysticism is considered to be one of the most, if not *the most*, influential interpretations of the subject, it is not without criticisms. In fact, it is important to note that some of the major criticisms against James' interpretation have come from fellow perennialist thinkers. A number of writers, especially (but not exclusively) in the early-twentieth century, have maintained a perennialist approach toward interpreting mysticism while, at the same time, critiquing aspects of James' account of it. Let us now turn to one of the most influential thinkers in this group and consider her work.

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[48] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 381.
[49] Ibid., 381.
[50] Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 75.

Evelyn Underhill and Mysticism

If William James is considered the godfather of the modern study of mysticism then it is Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) who should be called the godmother. This remarkable woman, whose eclectic learning included a grasp of spiritual classics, liturgy, Greek philosophy, medievalism, theology, symbolism, languages, and psychology, authored one of the most consequential books on the topic of mysticism ever written.[51] One can make the argument, although it is open to debate, that Underhill's influence transcends even James' for the simple reason that her breakthrough book surpassed academic interests and reached a popular audience. Steven Fanning explains that while Underhill lacked "the authority of high academic credentials, by dint of her intelligence, determination and spirituality she came to dominate the study of mysticism in England in the first two decades of the twentieth century."[52] Underhill's magnum opus is *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, first published in 1911. Bernard McGinn notes that "Underhill's long introduction is probably the most read English work on mysticism. Underhill did much to introduce mysticism to the English-speaking audience."[53]

Underhill has had a significant influence on contemporary scholarly understandings of mysticism, particularly regarding the question of definition. Underhill has promulgated a

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[51] Underhill's wide erudition is evident in the eclectic mastery of the diverse subject matter present in her publications. Steven Fanning notes that "Underhill's literary production is staggering, for 'in thirty-nine years she produced forty books, editions, and collections, and more than three hundred and fifty articles, essays, and reviews.' Equally amazing is her list of 'firsts:' [S]he was the first woman to lecture in theology at Oxford college, the first woman to lecture Anglican clergy, and one of the first women to be included in Church of England commissions. These accomplishments, along with her work as a retreat leader, made Evelyn Underhill a prominent figure in her day." See Steven Fanning, *Mystics of the Christian Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 209-211.

[52] Ibid., 209.

[53] Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 558. Underhill's other publications on the subject include *The Mystic Way* (1913), *Practical Mysticism* (1914), *The Essentials of Mysticism* (1920), and *The Mystics of the Church* (1964).

popular, if not generic in its broadness, definition of *mysticism* that has gained widespread acceptance by many modern scholars. She described mysticism as "the direct intuition or experience of God," articulating it even more broadly as "every religious tendency that discovers the way to God direct through inner experience without the mediation of reasoning. The constitutive element in mysticism is immediacy of contact with the deity."[54] The two central components of Underhill's definition are *experience* (mysticism is grounded in a personal, unitive, spiritual experience) and *immediacy* (mysticism is grounded in a *direct*, in other words unmediated, spiritual experience). Many scholars have come to accept Underhill's definition and have used it to set the framework for their own academic projects, highlighting immediacy and experience as essential components to understanding mysticism. Some have done this even while substituting their language of God or the Divine with such philosophical parlance as immediate experience with the "absolute" or "ultimate" Reality. As a guiding definition for their work *Mysticism, Holiness East and West*, Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody suggest "as a working description of mysticism" the "direct experience of ultimate reality."[55] F.C. Happold in *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*, similarly writes that in "the religious mystic there is a direct experience of the Presence of God."[56] In his book *Mystics of the Christian Tradition*, historian Steven Fanning acknowledges that there is a wide-ranging debate around the definition of the word but, to set a trustworthy framework for his own book, "the definition of mysticism employed in this present work is that of Evelyn Underhill."[57] In his systematic work *Models of Revelation*, Avery Dulles, S.J., dedicates a chapter to the model of "inner experience"

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[54] As quoted in Fanning, *Mystics of the Christian Tradition*, 2.
[55] As cited in Fanning, 221, n. 11. For original source see Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody, *Mysticism: Holiness East and West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 10.
[56] As cited in Fanning, ibid. For original source see F.C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*, revised edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 19.
[57] Fanning, 2.

which, he explains, as a model of revelation is directly connected to mysticism (Dulles here identified mystical experiences as being revelatory in character).[58] Dulles described the form of this model as "of course an immediate interior experience" and, in the process of noting sources, he listed the contribution of Evelyn Underhill, among "several prominent Anglicans," in articulating such a mystical model of revelation.[59]

While Underhill's definition constitutes a useful starting point it is not, by any means, a definition free of flaws or criticisms. Perhaps the most pervasive criticism that Underhill's definition has received is one coming from constructivist scholars who do not see mystical experiences as *immediate* experiences but, on the contrary, as experiences that are *mediated* and, therefore, filtered by the mystic's cultural and linguistic preconceptions and ideas (a debate we will tackle in detail in the following chapter). Another issue that needs to be addressed is the question of whether this definition of mysticism would include such extraordinary experiences as Marian apparitions, a primary subject of our discourse.

On the one hand, it could be argued that Underhill's definition (and other popular definitions) of mysticism would not incorporate the phenomena of Marian apparitions. Underhill's definition stresses immediate experience and, therefore, *union* with the deity (or God). But in Marian apparitions there is an evident *dualism* in the encounter, between the visionary and the Virgin Mary, that does not speak of perfect union: the subject retains his or her identity while encountering the object of experience. The Marian apparition is, therefore, not a self-transcending, unitive encounter with God, as the type which constitutes true mysticism.

On the other hand, it could be argued that the experience of mysticism must not always be free of degrees of dualism in order to be considered a true mystical experience. Ann Taves,

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[58] Avery Dulles, S.J., *Models of Revelation*, revised edition (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 69.
[59] Ibid., 76, 69.

for example, writing of the ways that philosophers of religion understand such terms, explains that the word "mystical" is "often used to refer to experiences of unity with or without a sense of multiplicity …."[60] Similarly, Jensine Andresen and Robert Forman write of "two distinct kinds of religious experience, non-dualistic and dualistic, roughly apophatic and kataphatic forms of spirituality. We also recognize that some experiences, which we call 'complex experiences', may include elements of one or both, and thus that there is a continuum of religious experiences."[61] In other words, a mystical experience that is unitive can still have "a sense of multiplicity," a dualism which by itself does not necessarily undermine the unity that is at the core of the encounter. Interestingly, James, in his Gifford Lectures, gave a documented example of such a phenomenon, that is both unitive and possesses a dualistic quality, that, perfectly illustrative for our purpose, constituted a vision of the Virgin Mary.

James presented the case of Alphonse Ratisbonne, a "freethinking," French Jewish atheist who had a profound disdain for Catholicism. Yet, he experienced an even more profound conversion to the Catholic faith after encountering an immediate and spontaneous vision of the Virgin Mary in 1842. This vision became for Ratisbonne a unitive experience with the divine. Ratisbonne wrote of the experience in a letter, portions of which James used in his lectures on conversion.[62] Ratisbonne explained how one day in Rome he casually entered a church (the Church of San Andrea) which was "poor, small, empty," explaining that no work of art in the church attracted his attention as Ratisbonne mechanically passed his eyes over the interior of the building.[63] The only other living presence in the church was "an entirely black dog which went trotting and turning before me as I mused." Then, in "an instant the dog had disappeared, the

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[60] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 20.
[61] Andresen and Forman, "Methodological Pluralism," 12.
[62] See James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 207-210.
[63] Ibid., 208.

whole church had vanished, I no longer saw anything, . . . or more truly I saw, O my God, one thing alone." He describes seeing the Virgin Mary. "Oh, indeed, it was She! It was indeed She!"[64] What is especially fascinating is what happened inside of Ratisbonne as he experienced this vision, encountering with it a unitive experience of the soul that led to deep illumination and conversion. He writes of the inner experience:

> I did not know where I was: I did not know whether I was Alphonse or another. I only felt myself changed and believed myself another me; I looked for myself in myself and did not find myself. In the bottom of my soul I felt an explosion of the most ardent joy; I could not speak; I had no wish to reveal what had happened. But I felt something solemn and sacred within me which made me ask for a priest. I was led to one; and there, alone, after he had given me the positive order, I spoke as best I could, kneeling, and with my heart still trembling. I could give no account to myself of the truth of which I had acquired a knowledge and a faith. All that I can say is that in an instant the bandage had fallen from my eyes; and not one bandage only, but the whole manifold of bandages in which I had been brought up. One after another they disappeared ….
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> I came out as from a sepulcher, from an abyss of darkness; and I was living, perfectly living. But I wept, for at the bottom of that gulf I saw the extreme of misery from which I had been saved by an infinite mercy; and I shuddered at the sight of my iniquities, stupefied, melted, overwhelmed with wonder and with gratitude.[65]

Ratisbonne continued to explain the mysterious illumination of knowledge that this encounter led him to. Not only did his mind become instantly acquainted with the truth of religious doctrines and spiritual realities—constituting a perfect example of an intellectual vision[66]—but he also *felt them*, the prowess behind these truths, in his soul. Again, his soul was experiencing a deeply unitive encounter with something higher, or something "more," as James would say. Ratisbonne explains:

> You may ask me how I came to this new insight, for truly I had never opened a book of religion nor even read a single page of the Bible, and the dogma of original sin is either entirely denied or forgotten by the Hebrews of to-day, so that I had thought so little about

[64] As quoted in James, ibid., 208-209.
[65] Ibid., 209.
[66] An "intellectual vision," constituting the reception of new knowledge – thus, illumination – is one of the three categories of visionary phenomena, alongside imaginative and corporal visions. All three are discussed in detail in the following section.

> it that I doubt whether I ever knew its name. But how came I, then, to this perception of it? I can answer nothing save this, that on entering that church I was in darkness altogether, and on coming out of it I saw the fullness of light. I can explain the change no better than by the simile of a profound sleep or the analogy of one born blind who should suddenly open his eyes to the day. He sees, but cannot define the light which bathes him and by means of which he sees the objects which excite his wonder. If we cannot explain physical light, how can we explain the light which is the truth itself? And I think I remain within the limits of veracity when I say that without having any knowledge of the letter of religious doctrine, I now intuitively perceived its sense and spirit. Better than if I saw them, I *felt* those hidden things; I felt them by the inexplicable effects they produced in me. It all happened in my interior mind; and those impressions, more rapid than thought, shook my soul, revolved and turned it, as it were, in another direction, towards other aims, by other paths.[67]

In the case of Alphonse Ratisbonne we see a powerful example of how a mystical experience can be both dualistic and unitive. The dualism is present, of course, in the fact that Ratisbonne saw a vision of the Virgin Mary, therefore (if authentic) of a spiritual presence separate from him, while the unity is present in the fact that Ratisbonne's mind and soul experienced a profound, unitive encounter during the vision which led to instant conversion and illumination of spiritual mysteries, powerfully touching and transforming his very self. It is fair to deduce, from the description of his experience, that Ratisbonne experienced an altered state of consciousness, being taken at the moment of the vision to another reality of perception, the type that James wrote of when articulating the characteristics of mystical consciousness. It is noteworthy that the four characteristics of ineffability, transiency, passivity, and noetic quality were all present in the experience that Ratisbonne described, making a case that the encounter could very well be what James called an experience of "mystical consciousness."

While "the pioneer work of William James"[68] was acknowledged by Underhill, she argued that "James' celebrated 'four marks' of the mystic state," ineffability, noetic quality,

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[67] As quoted in James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 209-210.

[68] Evelyn Underhill (2009-12-12). *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, 158. Evinity Publishing Inc. Kindle Edition. This edition will be cited unless indicated otherwise.

transiency, and passivity, "will fail to satisfy us."[69] As a response, Underhill formed her own definition by applying "four other rules or notes" which she believed could provide a better explanation of what mysticism means.[70] Her points explained that true mysticism: 1) is active and practical, not passive and theoretical; 2) has aims that are purely spiritual and transcendent; 3) pursues as its personal object love for the eternal One; and 4) constitutes an entire orientation of life.

In considering the differences between Underhill's interpretation of mysticism from James' hermeneutic, it is most important to highlight that Underhill does not limit her definition of mysticism to an altered state of consciousness (as James and other authors defined it) but perceives mysticism in a broader framework as constituting a complete way of life. Thus, for Underhill, the "mystical" is not just a transient, extraordinary experience (whether with or without multiplicity) but an entire orientation of living, what she calls the "mystic way," which may be grounded in an initial experience of immediacy and union but does not stop there. To better understand Underhill's hermeneutic let us take a more detailed look at her four points behind what constitutes true mysticism.

1. "Mysticism is practical, not theoretical."

   In explaining that mysticism is practical and not theoretical, Underhill is making the point that one cannot reduce mysticism to abstract theology because at its core it is not intellectual but experiential. "Mysticism, like revelation, is final and personal. It is not merely a beautiful and suggestive diagram but experience in its most intense form."[71] While Underhill is aligning mysticism with spirituality,

[69] Ibid., 51.
[70] Ibid., 51.
[71] Ibid., 52.

emphasizing that it is about the personal, inner encounter and not abstract intellectualizing, this does not mean that Underhill is excluding the theological importance of studying mysticism (or "mystical theology"). On the contrary, mysticism "provides the material, the substance, upon which mystical philosophy cogitates; as theologians cogitate upon the revelation which forms the basis of faith."[72] Underhill makes a distinction between mystical writers (the philosophers and theologians who have written about the mystical experiences of others) and true mystics (those who have had personal experiences with the Absolute), specifying, however, that sometimes the two categories can be personified in a single individual, like Meister Eckhart (who wrote about his own experiences). Though admiring the works of mystical writers, who with the beauty of their prose "are our stepping-stones to higher things,"[73] Underhill does not consider them true mystics because her definition pertains to personal experience, not intellectual speculation on experience.

2. Mysticism is an entirely "Spiritual Activity."

With her second point, Underhill means that the sole purpose of the mystic is union and love of God, without any ulterior motivations. Reaching union with God, the mystic develops a detachment from all lesser cravings: from personal power, money, influence, self-consciousness; even from noble things like a desire for virtue and knowledge. His sole aim is God, nothing else. Even considering benevolent goals – like using spiritual power to help others – such are not the aims of the mystic, Underhill argues. The mystic is fully concentrated on the

[72] Ibid., 52.
[73] Ibid., 53.

supernatural, not the natural world. Yet, paradoxically, it is that concentration and development in the supernatural life that will lead the mystic to a deeper benevolence in the natural world, for reaching union with God the mystic becomes "an agent of the Eternal Goodness."[74] Therefore, while the mystic needs nothing but God, and is fully satisfied with this divine union, it is that union which will inspire the mystic's good works; to the point that he "will spend himself unceasingly for other men …."[75] Attainment of this charitable disposition is not the aim of mysticism, which is purely spiritual, but the result of it. Here we see an obvious parallel to James' focus on the fruits that stem from mysticism, especially the fruits of a holy and saintly life after having an encounter with the "more" (to use James' phraseology).

3. "The business and method of mysticism is love."

   Love is the sole purpose of the mystic's path, according to Underhill. Mysticism is not about exploring the knowledge of a higher Reality, but being in love with that Reality. Egan explains it thus: "The mystic is in love with a Reality which is both living and personal. The God of Love has created a homeward-turning love within every person."[76] In other words, there is a longing and desire within each person which is not satisfied (to use familiar Augustinian phraseology) until the soul seeks its purpose: an intimate, loving relationship with its Creator. Mysticism, therefore, is about the *relationship* between lovers (the intimacy between the soul who seeks to love God, and the God who loves the soul). Again,

[74] Ibid., 53.
[75] Ibid., 53.
[76] Egan, *What Are They Saying About Mysticism*?, 41.

Underhill emphasizes that this love constitutes an entire orientation of living and being for the mystic (her broader scope of mysticism is in play here) – thus, this love is not a shallow or superficial emotion – empty affection – but impacts the mystic's entire life (every tendency, every action and decision) to be focused toward pursuing the great Lover. "Mystic Love is a total dedication of the will; the deep-seated desire and tendency of the soul toward its Source." Underhill continues to articulate the depths of this love with poignant language: "It is a condition of humble access, a life-movement of the self: more direct in its methods, more valid in its results—even in the hands of the least lettered of its adepts—than the most piercing intellectual vision of the greatest philosophic mind." Here (and in further passages) she reiterates that the essence of this love transcends dialectics and reason, coming from a deeper place of the heart, from the affections of the soul. Underhill also emphasizes the pluralistic reality of this love – mystics across cultures, from the all great religions, she highlights, have been driven by the force of this "Mystic Love" to pursue their Lover, "mystics of every race and creed."[77] She sums up her examination of this love by explaining that it is, for the mystic: (a) "the active, conative, expression of his will and desire for the Absolute" and (b) "his innate tendency to that Absolute, his spiritual weight. He is only thoroughly natural, thoroughly alive, when he is obeying its voice. For him it is the source of joy, the secret of the universe, the vivifying principle of things."[78] Thus, this love is life-giving for the mystic, the source of all bliss and meaning; the utmost pursuit.

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[77] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 55.
[78] Ibid., 54.

4. "Mysticism entails a definite psychological decision."

   Here Underhill is reiterating the wholeness that is necessary for true mysticism, as well as giving voice to the path (the stages of the journey) necessary to reach union with the divine; thus psychologically, such a decision and path entails the activity and transformation of every part of the person, conscious and unconscious ("a definite psychological decision"). She is stating, therefore, that the mystic way requires not just a change of attitude, tendency, or will, but "involves the organizing of the whole self…a remaking of the whole character on high levels in the interests of the transcendental life."[79] Underhill is taking the mystic path beyond experience and spiritual desire and emphasizing *action*. She is speaking of the spiritual journey of the mystic, which proceeds to change the psychological make-up of the person, from a lower self to a higher self. She is speaking about the purpose of the journey of conversion, essentially that which bridges the gap between God and the soul: sanctity – thus the moral, virtuous, and spiritual efforts that the mystic makes to reach "transmutation"[80] (Underhill's term); to be transformed into the One that the mystic seeks (thus to be holy). Underhill articulates that there are several stages, which she later describes in much greater detail, that the mystic's journey entails toward reaching a transformation of the self into a higher self through union with the Real. She cites such classics in this genre as Teresa of Avila and her seven mansions, as stages of ascent which speak to the reality of the mystic path, intended to transform and unite the soul with the

[79] Ibid., 57.
[80] Ibid., 57.

> Absolute. "The God-experience demands holiness, sanctity, and the remaking of the self on a higher level."[81]

Interestingly, Underhill adds a fifth "corollary to these four rules," by reemphasizing a "statement already made" (thus highlighting its importance), enunciating that true mysticism must be understood as never being self-seeking.[82] It is not about spiritual joys, knowledge, the seeking of ecstatic union or any other spiritual, moral, or worldly pleasure or happiness; but, again, mysticism is about love for love's sake. At its center is the purest of intentions: a lover's journey toward the Beloved.

Considering that mysticism for Underhill is not a passing, extraordinary experience of an altered state of consciousness, but a complete way of life, paving the way for a spiritual path, or journey, Underhill articulates various stages (or phases) which constitute the "Mystic Way." Adding to the traditional trinity of mystical theology that make up the stages of spiritual ascent – the purgative, the illuminative, and the unitive – Underhill writes of various others. Her stages begin with the Awakening of the Self; then the Purification of the Self; the Illumination of the Self; Voices and Visions; Introversion (under which Underhill includes Recollection, Quiet, and Contemplation); Ecstasy and Rapture; the Dark Night of the Soul; and the Unitive Life. Egan explains that no author "thus far has so accurately captured and described the phases and stages of mystical life as Underhill."[83] Giving a detailed account of each stage, and the mystical theology contained therein, would be beyond the scope or purpose of this writing. However, since we are concentrating on extraordinary religious *experiences*, particularly on visionary

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[81] Egan, *What Are They Saying About Mysticism?,* 41.
[82] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 58.
[83] Egan, *What Are They Saying About Mysticism?*, 42.

experiences in subsequent chapters, let us focus on Underhill's treatment of voices and visions (a stage within the mystic path).

Interestingly, Underhill refers to the field of extraordinary religious phenomena – her terminology is that of "abnormal psychic phenomena"[84] – as "that eternal battle-ground."[85] What she means is: whether the topic pertains to visions, apparitions, voices, the stigmata, or any other extraordinary phenomena, it is subjected to the "battle-ground" of interpretation, of hermeneutics – of the various debates of understanding surrounding such matters. It is the battle-ground between believers and skeptics, between perennialists and constructivists, between holists and reductionists, between super-naturalists and rationalists, among ideas, beliefs, philosophies and ideologies; and, of course, there are great consequences behind these hermeneutical debates, particularly regarding such issues as the existence of God, faith, the supernatural, the Church, the relationship between spirituality and psychology, the relationship between belief and doubt. Underhill articulates the issue thus, noting first what critics of such phenomena have to ask:

> The question for their critics must really be this: do these automatisms, which appear so persistently as a part of the contemplative life, represent merely the dreams and fancies, the old digested percepts of the visionary, objectivized and presented to his surface-mind in a concrete form; or, are they ever representations--symbolic, if you like--of some fact, force, or personality, some "triumphing spiritual power," external to himself? Is the vision only a pictured thought, an activity of the dream imagination: or, is it the violent effort of the self to translate something impressed upon its deeper being, some message received from without, which projects this sharp image and places it before the consciousness?[86]

Here Underhill is conveying the dialogical framework that is present behind major contemporary debates surrounding extraordinary religious experiences: are they constructions of the human mind—"merely the dreams and fancies, digested percepts of the visionary"—which come from

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[84] "We now come to that eternal battle-ground, the detailed discussion of those abnormal psychic phenomena which appear so persistently in the history of the mystics." Underhill, *Mysticism*, 156.
[85] Ibid., 156.
[86] Ibid., 157.

within, or, on the other hand, are they authentic experiences with a spiritual reality that are not constructed but contain "some message received from without"? Hence, through this dialectic of "within" or "without" we are, essentially, dealing with a debate between constructivism and receptivity; the former postulates that such extraordinary experiences are, at their root, a human construction (and, therefore, either natural or pathological – as the experiences may be hallucinatory – but not supernatural), while the latter postulates that such experiences, when authentic, are received through an external, spiritual agent (and are, therefore, authentic supernatural encounters with a higher power).

Underhill herself takes a middle-ground approach. She argues that such experiences, when authentic, do come from a higher spiritual source (and, therefore, cannot be understood as completely constructed). However, she also claims that such experiences are filtered through the human psyche, which uses its pre-existent cultural concepts and ideas – as hermeneutical symbols, we can say – to interpret, understand, and frame the experience (therefore possessing components of constructivism). What Underhill is ultimately getting at, and this is an important characteristic of her hermeneutical framework, is that such extraordinary experiences are usually subjective, not objective. Therefore, there is an admixture in play, an admixture between what the human mind brings and what the spiritual source brings in framing the experience. While Underhill acknowledges that such experiences are usually not objective, she is not denigrating the authenticity of these experiences. Underhill challenges the prevalent paradigm of thinking on religious experience that has historically influenced discourse by presenting a presupposed complementarity between objectivity and authenticity, on the one hand, and subjectivity and inauthenticity, on the other hand. Underhill, on the contrary, argues that an experience can be both subjective and authentic; the two are not at odds, as has been historically supposed, but

constitute complementary components of a fuller, more complex and robust reality. "If we could cease, once for all, to regard visions and voices as objective, and be content to see in them forms of symbolic expression, ways in which the subconscious activity of the spiritual self reaches the surface-mind, many of the disharmonies noticeable in visionary experience, which have teased the devout, and delighted the agnostic, would fade away."[87]

In terms of visionary experiences, a hermeneutic of complete constructivism would argue that the pre-existent cultural concepts and symbols of the visionary construct a false experience that is hallucinatory in nature. Underhill, on the other hand, would acknowledge the presence and utility of pre-existent concepts and symbols in influencing a visionary experience, but – in any authentic experience – she would understand the cultural symbols to operate as a *hermeneutical lens* through which the visionary interprets, understands, and frames the experience. Thus, pre-existent knowledge does not act as a source which constructs the experience but as a lens of interpretation through which the experience is processed and understood. Therefore, the experience can be both authentic and subjective. It is authentic because the source of the experience is external, spiritual and transcendent. It is subjective because the human mind filters the experience through the subjectivity of its pre-existent concepts and symbols; in other words, through the subjectivity of its pre-existent knowledge.[88] Let us consider a simple example to illustrate such a reality.

A Christian, a Muslim, and a Buddhist can each have an extraordinary experience in which it is believed that a divine message has been conveyed. A Christian may see (either in the mind or externally) the figure of Jesus conveying the message, while the Muslim may see the figure of Mohammed, while the Buddhist may see the figure of Buddha. The subjectivity of

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[87]Underhill, *Mysticism*, 213; edition cited in note 28.
[88] Ibid., 213.

these experiences does not mean that they are simply personal constructions of each individual's religious beliefs and, therefore, false or inauthentic externalizations of the mind. On the contrary, all three, despite the theological distinctions and contradictions that are present therein, can be authentic experiences, Underhill would argue. Here God, or the spiritual entity providing the experience, can use each visionary's pre-existent religious and cultural symbols and beliefs to communicate a message. Underhill articulates it thus: "The transcendental powers take for this purpose such material as they can find amongst the hoarded beliefs and memories of the self."[89] Thus, to reiterate, the experience can be both subjective and authentic.

Categories of Visions (Visionary Phenomena)

To delve deeper into an understanding of visionary experiences, Underhill considers the classic, threefold categorization that visions, in Christian theology, have been grouped into: the intellectual, the imaginary, and the corporal.[90] Augustine was the first major theologian to treat the issue of visions, thus visionary experiences, from a theological perspective, hoping to understand the distinctions between, and intricacies of, such phenomena.[91] It is in two of his works, *Contra Adimantum* (394) and *De Genesi ad litteram* (414), that he tackled the subject.[92] Augustine was fascinated with the question of epistemology, how human beings acquire knowledge, and in this regard dealt with the matter of visions. Niels Christian Hvidt explains: "Even though Augustine's concept of *vision* is very different from how mystical theology treats the visionary category, his thoughts have influenced mystical theology profoundly."[93] Augustine developed the three-fold categorization for identifying and distinguishing visions, postulating

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[89] Ibid., 213.
[90] Ibid., 220.
[91] Niels Christian Hvidt, *Christian Prophecy: The Post-Biblical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 135.
[92] Ibid., 136.
[93] Ibid., 136.

that there are 1) corporal visions; 2) spiritual visions; and 3) intellectual visions.[94] The second category here – "spiritual" – has been subsequently rendered by the Christian mystical tradition by the term *imaginary* or *imaginative*.[95] Thus, mystical writers after Augustine have identified the threefold categorization of corporal, imaginary, and intellectual visions. Gregory the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Birgitta of Vadstena, and Teresa of Avila are some of the major theologians and mystics who have used this Augustinian framework in their writings on visions, as well as modern theologians like Reginald Garrigou-LaGrange.[96] Yet, it is noteworthy that this hermeneutic predates even Augustine's influence and derives from neoplatonic philosophy, which Augustine was using, as before him the philosopher Porphyry separated visions "into the three groups of corporal, imaginary, and intellectual."[97] Let us consider the details of these visionary categories.

Corporal Visions

Corporal visions include the type of phenomena that are very prevalent in modern apparition cases (whether Marian or Christocentric), when a single visionary or a group of visionaries see a presence with their physical eyes which no one else can see. The presence, or object of the vision, is seen as an external, three-dimensional entity. By *external*, this means that the entity appears outside of the individual (it is not an "internal vision") and is perceived by the individual's external senses.[98]

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[94] Ibid., 136-137.
[95] Ibid., 137.
[96] See ibid., 136, and Mark Miravalle, *Private Revelation: Discerning with the Church*. (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Press, 2007), 24-25.
[97] Hvidt, *Christian Prophecy*, 136.
[98] Miravalle, *Private Revelation*, 24; Hvidt, *Christian Prophecy*, 136.

Imaginative Visions

Imaginative visions are visions which are not external, outside of the individual, but internal, perceived by the inner senses. Mark Miravalle describes an imaginative vision as "a vision of a material object without the assistance of the eyes," which is "perceived by the imaginative sense."[99] The understanding is that God uses the faculties of the human imagination through which to infuse such inner visions. Hvidt explains that these "are visions realized through mechanisms of the human psyche that are made up of images that the soul has acquired through contact with the physical reality."[100] Thus, such visions are conveyed through the natural faculties and are made up of the cultural concepts and symbols that the mind already knows and understands; although they are infused by a higher presence and, therefore, are understood to be inspired. Here what we see in play is an intertwining relationship between the supernatural and the natural, as the infused (thus supernatural) vision is filtered and processed (thus mediated) through the natural, imaginative faculties of the mind.

Intellectual Visions

Intellectual visions are not mediated through any form of sense perception, whether internal or external, but constitute direct, infused knowledge. "The illumination is given to the intellect without any dependence on sense images or external senses."[101] In other words, the mind does not see symbols or concepts (like in an imaginative vision), nor do the eyes see an external entity (like in a corporal vision) but the intellect is filled with new knowledge that is directly communicated. The advantage of this type of visionary communication, Hvidt points out, is that the communication – not being filtered and, therefore, possibly altered by the human

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[99] Ibid., Miravalle, 25.
[100] Hvidt, *Christian Prophecy*, 137.
[101] Miravalle, *Private Revelation*, 25.

senses – retains its purity, its original integrity.[102] It is, therefore, the only type of vision that can be called *objective*, as the human senses – with all their subjectivity – play no role in filtering the vision. The Polish nun and mystic Saint Faustina Kowalska (1905-1938),[103] who reported experiencing visions of Jesus in the early twentieth-century which she recorded in her diary and which led to the popular Divine Mercy devotion in the Catholic Church, has written: "There is a higher and more perfect union with God; namely, intellectual union. Here, the soul is safer from illusions; its spirituality is purer and more profound. In a life where the senses are involved, there is more danger of illusion."[104]

Passive Imaginary Visions

To this classic, threefold categorization of visions, Underhill adds two subcategories. Specifically, within the category of imaginary visions Underhill adds two types of subcategories: passive imaginary visions[105] and active imaginary visions.[106] Additionally, within one of these

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[102] Hvidt, *Christian Prophecy*, 137.

[103] Popularly known as "Saint Faustina," her full religious name was Sister Maria Faustina Kowalska, born as Helena Kowalska in the village of Glogowiec, Turek County, Lodz Province, Poland, on August 25, 1905.

[104] Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul*, third edition with revisions, 8th printing (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 2011), 64-65. The notion that the intellectual vision is more reliable than the imaginative (which relies on inner sense perception) or the corporal (which relies on external sense perception) is prominent among Christian mystics and writers of mysticism. The idea that sense perception filters and can distort knowledge, however, is an issue that is not exclusive to religious or mystical experiences but is, at its core, an epistemological matter that can be traced back as far as ancient Greek philosophy. In his dialogue *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates explain that truth and wisdom are only attainable by "pure thought alone," in other words by thinking that transcends sense perception. This constituted part of Plato's soul-body dichotomy; he associated pure thinking as knowledge that is attainable only by the soul when it is untouched by the senses while, conversely, he associated the senses with the body, whose passions, desires, and filters distort pure knowledge and, therefore, pose an obstacle to the attainment and pursuit of truth and wisdom. A person who attains pure knowledge will do this most perfectly, according to Plato, when approaching "the object with thought alone, without associating any sight with thought, or dragging in any sense perception with his reasoning, but who, using pure thought alone, tries to track down each reality pure and by itself, freeing himself as far as possible from eyes and ears, and in a word, from the whole body, because the body confuses the soul and does not allow it to acquire truth and wisdom whenever it is associated with it." See Plato, "Phaedo," in C.D.C. Reeve and Patrick Lee Miller, eds., *Introductory Readings in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 111.

[105] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 223; edition cited in note 28.

[106] Ibid., 226.

subcategories, Underhill adds two more subcategories. Underhill explains passive imaginary visions as being "spontaneous mental pictures at which the self looks, but in the action of which it does not participate," and she expounds that there are two forms of passive imaginary visions: 1) the symbolic and 2) the personal.[107]

Symbolic Passive Imaginary Visions

The symbolic refer to passive imaginary visions that are highly allegorical and metaphorical, poetic in their imagery, whose truths are conveyed through symbols. Underhill explains: "Many of the visions of the great prophetic mystics – e.g., St. Hildegarde [of Bingen] – have so elaborate a symbolic character, that much intellectual activity is involved in their interpretation."[108] Perhaps the most stunning example of this kind of vision is the biblical text the Book of Revelation, which (according to its author) is based on a vision, and whose extravagant and powerful symbolism is legendary. Underhill underscores the poetic charge of such visions. Such a vision "is really a visualized poem, inspired by a direct contact with the truth."[109] Furthermore:

> It is an accommodation of the supra-sensible to our human disabilities, a symbolic reconstruction of reality on levels accessible to sense. This symbolic reconstruction is seen as a profoundly significant, vivid, and dramatic dream: and since this dream conveys transcendental truth, and initiates the visionary into the atmosphere of the Eternal, it may well claim precedence over that prosaic and perpetual vision which we call the "real world."[110]

Personal Passive Imaginary Visions

The other type of passive imaginary vision is the *personal*. Underhill describes this vision as vivid and as something that is *concretely* (thus it is distinct from being a *symbolic* vision)

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[107] Ibid., 223.
[108] Ibid., 223.
[109] Ibid., 223.
[110] Ibid., 224.

related to the devotee's religious beliefs and spiritual passions. To provide a simple example of this type of vision, Underhill references visions of Christ that "so many Catholic ecstatics" have experienced during the moment of consecration at Mass.[111] Regarding the personalism of the experience, Underhill stresses the interior fruits that such visions produce, emphasizing the "life-enhancing quality" that include "the feeling states" of certainty and joy, as characteristic fruits of such encounters. If the symbolic vision is like a poem, Underhill calls the personal vision "a love-letter" – a love letter that is "received by the ardent soul. . . ."[112] In other words, this is a vision of great intimacy, one that also possesses, in its transcendent beauty, that mystical quality of ineffability, appearing "under the form of inexpressible beauty" to the soul that encounters the experience.[113]

Active Imaginary Visions

Alongside passive imaginary visions (both symbolic and personal) Underhill writes of active imaginary visions. Here the element of a deeper participation from the soul is present. "In this vision, which always has a dramatic character, the self seems to itself to act, not merely to look on."[114] What we see in the description of this visionary category is one reason why Underhill believed that James' four characteristics of mysticism would fail to satisfy, as in this example "passivity," as a characteristic of mystical consciousness, is undermined with *activity*. Active imaginary visions can have various characteristics and they always possess transformative, life-altering fruits for the one who undergoes the experience. They are "active" for, according to Underhill, they are expressions of the soul's mystical journey, the soul's

[111] Ibid., 224.
[112] Ibid., 225.
[113] Ibid., 225.
[114] Ibid., 226.

movement to deeper levels of consciousness, to deeper chambers of one's interior castle (to use Teresa of Avila's famous phraseology).

> Such visions may possess many of the characters of dreams; they may be purely symbolic; they may be theologically "realistic." They may entail a journey through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, an excursion into fairyland, a wrestling with the Angel in the Way. Whatever their outward form, they are always connected with inward results. They are the automatic expressions of intense subliminal activity; not merely the media by which the self's awareness of the Absolute is strengthened and enriched, but the outward and visible signs of its movement towards new levels of consciousness.[115]

As examples of active imaginary visions Underhill references the stigmatization of Francis of Assisi and Catherine of Siena, as well as "the transverberation of St. Teresa,"[116] referring to Teresa of Avila's famously erotic mystical encounter with an angel thrusting a golden sphere into her heart, depicted most vividly in Bernini's baroque masterpiece "St. Teresa in Ecstasy."[117]

Yet, it is another experience from Catherine of Siena, Underhill argues, that most convincingly portrays the participatory drama of an active imaginary vision. Underhill is referring to Catherine's vision which in Christian art is described as the "Mystic Marriage of Catherine of Siena."[118] It is a vision that Catherine experienced in 1366, vividly depicting her betrothal to Christ, wherein Catherine receives a ring from Christ, is surrounded by heavenly wedding guests – from the Virgin Mary to John the Evangelist, the Apostle Paul, and St. Dominic, founder of Catherine's order – and is formally wed to Christ in a celestial wedding as His bride. Regarding this vision, Underhill makes a fascinating and important observation, one which speaks to the complexity of such visionary experiences, and again tackles the reciprocal relationship between a vision being both subjective and authentic.

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[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid., 227.
[118] Ibid., 226.

Underhill argues that it is not difficult to discern the material, the content, from which Catherine's vision derives, explaining that it is taken "from the legendary history of St. Catherine of Alexandria. . . ."[119] Underhill postulates that Catherine of Siena (or, in Italian, *Caterina Benincasa*) would be familiar with the saint of Alexandria who was her namesake, and therefore suggests: "Caterina Benincasa showed a characteristic artistic suggestibility and quickness in transforming the stuff of old history into the medium of a profound personal experience."[120] Very importantly, while Underhill explains that much of the external material for the vision is culturally constructed, coming from a previous visionary account that Catherine would be familiar with, what is important is not the external material but the interior effects of the vision. It was the interior effects of the vision which resulted in a permanent change in Catherine that allowed her to enter into a deeper state of mystical consciousness.[121] In other words, Underhill makes a significant distinction between the external content and the internal prowess of the vision. The former, the external content, may be a subliminal actualization of material that Catherine's psyche was familiar with, thus culturally constructed. But the latter, the internal prowess, taking the visionary into a state of deeper mystical consciousness, is an act of spiritual transformation coming from the transcendent realm. It is an act of grace, something that can only come from outside, from above.[122] Thus, here we see a complex admixture which shows how a vision can have components which are both culturally constructed by the visionary's mind, on the one hand, and divinely infused by a higher power (by God), on the other hand. Fr. Benedict Groeschel has pointed out that when dealing with visionary experiences there is a lot of gray area in play. Most of the time, such encounters are not simply black-and-white manifestations but

[119] Ibid., 227.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.

more complex and nuanced in their delicate intricacies.[123] Thus, in the case of the "Mystic Marriage of Catherine of Siena," Underhill can conclude:

> Long prepared by that growing disposition of her deeper self which caused her to hear the reiterated promise of her Beloved, the vision when it came was significant, not for its outward circumstances, but for its permanent effect upon her life. In it she passed to a fresh level of consciousness; entering upon that state of spiritual wedlock, of close and loving identification with the interests of Christ, which Richard of St. Victor calls the "Third Stage of Ardent Love."[124]

Active Intellectual Visions

A final note that Underhill wanted to touch on in this visionary category is that "active" visions need not always be recognized as imaginative visions. They can also be intellectual visions, and therefore we enter into another subcategory known as *active intellectual visions*. To illustrate this point Underhill invokes the example of the Franciscan mystic Angela of Foligno. She cites a lengthy description which Angela gave of one of her mystical encounters, in which Angela described being in the midst of the Trinity and being taken into a higher level of consciousness, so sweet, sublime, and ineffable that she has yet to experience such "great and unspeakable delight."[125] What makes the vision intellectual, and not imaginative, is the fact that it is conveyed through cognitive comprehension, not visible symbols, pictures, or concepts – simply through an infused understanding given to the intellect that one has entered, and is participating in, a higher state of mystical consciousness (in Angela's Christian context, a deeper experience with the holy Trinity).[126]

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[123] Interview with Groeschel in Randall Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective: An Investigation of Holy Visions* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 419. Groeschel, an expert on the subject of private revelations, authored a classic work on discerning visionary experiences: see Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R., *A Still, Small Voice: A Practical Guide on Reported Revelations* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993).
[124] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 227; edition cited in note 28.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid., 227-228.

Categories of Voices (Auditory Phenomena)

As a parallel to the three-fold categorization of intellectual, imaginary, and corporal visions Underhill discusses the phenomena of voices (or the phenomena of mystics hearing voices) through the correspondingly trifold discourse of 1) immediate or inarticulate voices; 2) interior and distinct voices; and 3) exterior words.[127] With the phenomena of voices, or "audition," as Underhill titles such graces, the "mystic becomes aware of Something which speaks to him either clearly or implicitly; giving him abrupt and unexpected orders and encouragements."[128] We can think of several prominent examples throughout Christian history that illustrate such phenomena and their influence: from Saul (or St. Paul) hearing the voice of Christ on the road to Damascus, resulting in his great conversion, to Augustine hearing the voices of children singing in the garden in Milan to encourage him to open the Scriptures and read (a pivotal point in his conversion story), to Francis of Assisi hearing the voice of Christ telling him "rebuild my Church" at San Damiano, to Joan of Arc leading the French armies in battle against the English at the encouragement and orders of her Voices. Just considering these four examples, it is by no means a stretch of the imagination to say that this phenomenon has been instrumental, as a catalyst, in influencing some of the most important Christian figures and consequently, by their active lives, movements throughout Church history.

Immediate or Inarticulate Voices

The three auditory categories of voices possess the characteristics and nuances of the three main visionary categories, being a reflection. Thus, like the intellectual vision, the first category of audition – the immediate or inarticulate voice – constitutes an "infusion of new

[127] Ibid., 214, 220.
[128] Ibid., 214.

knowledge or new life," coming instantly and being a form of divine inspiration.[129] Like the intellectual vision, this category is not filtered by the human senses and, therefore, is the purest form of auditory experience with the greatest authority when compared to the other two. Therefore, since the senses are not in play, the mystic does not technically "hear" a voice in this experience but receives an infusion of knowledge which directly affects the intellect. Underhill, however, does not make a clear distinction between what would separate and distinguish this type of auditory phenomenon from an intellectual vision, as both are conveyed through identical terminology in her narrative as conveying an immediate (thus unmediated) infusion of knowledge that comes from a higher source.

Interior or Distinct Voices

Like the imaginative vision, the second auditory category – interior or distinct voices – constitutes a combination, or an admixture, of the transcendent working with the human senses. Thus here the imaginative senses of the mind are in play, as the experience is filtered through the human psyche. Here, also, the mystic actually "hears within his mind"[130] distinct interior words. Thus, the mystic's "inner ear," or the ear of the soul, hears audible, interior words. To accentuate how concrete this can be, Underhill invokes the example of the medieval Dominican mystic Henry Suso, who stated that he received a hundred meditations on the Passion of Jesus Christ in the form of distinct interior words which, he emphasized, were conveyed to him in German and not in Latin.[131] Suso's specificity of language illustrates to what degree his senses were involved in receiving, interpreting, and transmitting the auditory phenomenon, to the point of identifying the exact language that was used in conveying the grace.

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[129] Ibid., 215.
[130] Ibid., 216.
[131] Ibid.

Exterior Words

The third auditory category – exterior words – constitutes a phenomenon, like the corporal vision, wherein the exterior senses are the lenses of perception. Thus, as in the corporal vision, wherein the mystic sees through outward senses – through the eyes – an external and three-dimensional presence, in the category of exterior words the mystic hears a voice or a number of voices through his or her outward ears. Underhill refers to the voices that guided Joan of Arc, and the voice of Christ which from the Cross spoke to Francis of Assisi, as examples of this type of phenomena.[132]

Critiques of James and Underhill

Although they are both considered to be "perennialists" within the study of mysticism, there are many differences between Underhill and James when it comes to the interpretation of the subject. One key reality that this speaks to is that there is a plurality to perennialism which is present among scholars of religion and mysticism; meaning, while various scholars apply a perennialist approach to understanding mystical experiences, there are hermeneutical variations to theories of perennialism. We will tackle this issue in the following chapter, where the perennialist-constructivist debate will be observed in greater detail and where attention will be given to the diverse hermeneutical intricacies behind both perennialism and constructivism. However, for now, let us consider some major areas wherein James and Underhill are vulnerable to critique, as evident shortcomings in their hermeneutical approaches can lead to an exploration of some of the major issues of interpretation, especially present in recent history, that surround the subject of extraordinary religious experiences.

[132] Ibid., 216-217.

Critiquing James:

Hermeneutical Fallacies

One area where James has received much criticism, and Underhill would agree[133] with the criticism, is in his assertion – something that we have yet to mention – that states of mystical consciousness can be reached not only through spiritual methods, or spontaneous occurrences that come from a higher source, but also through the usage of self-induced intoxicants such as alcohol, drugs, or anaesthetics.[134] Commentators have dismissed this claim of James' as a form of "pseudo-mysticism."[135] Yet, James writes that the "drunken consciousness is one bit of the mystic consciousness, and our total opinion of it must find its place in our opinion of that larger whole."[136] James writes very poetically (though one senses a trace of the comical as well in his description) of the drunken state, explaining:

> The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour. Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the greater exciter of the *Yes* function in man. It brings to votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes him for the moment one with truth. Not through mere perversity do men run after it.[137]

Similarly, of other intoxicants James writes:

> Nitrous oxide and ether, especially nitrous oxide, when sufficiently diluted with air, stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree. Depth beyond depth of truth seems revealed to the inhaler. This truth fades out, however, or escapes, at the moment of coming to; and if any words remain over in which it seemed to clothe itself, they prove to be the veriest nonsense. Nevertheless, the sense of a profound meaning

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[133] Underhill writes: "What then do we really mean by mysticism? A word which is impartially applied to the performances of mediums and the ecstasies of the saints, to 'menticulture' and sorcery, dreamy poetry and medieval art, to prayer and palmistry, the doctrinal excesses of Gnosticism, and the tepid speculations of the Cambridge Platonists – even, according to William James, to the higher branches of intoxication – soon ceases to have any useful meaning. Its employment merely confuses the inexperienced student, who ends with the vague idea that every kind of supersensual theory and practice is somehow 'mystical.'" See Underhill, *Mysticism*, 61; edition cited in note 28.

[134] See James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 348-354.

[135] Egan, *What Are They Saying About Mysticism?*, 11.

[136] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 349.

[137] Ibid., 348-349.

> having been there persists; and I know more than one person who is persuaded that in the nitrous oxide trance we have a genuine metaphysical revelation.[138]

James' observations here are vulnerable to a lot of easy criticism. The most obvious is that what James tries to convey as a state of mystical consciousness can easily be dismissed as artificial intoxication, hallucinatory in nature and lacking any foundation in the transcendent. Moreover, unwittingly here, James may also be falling into the fallacy of reducing mystical consciousness to a certain "feeling," such as the drunken state induces, while ignoring his own process of discernment that measures the spiritual and practical fruits of the encounter to test its authenticity.

Harvey Egan notes the contradiction of the argument within James' own hermeneutic of discernment in distinguishing between genuine and false mysticism. "If James so highly values strength of personality, integrity of life, creativity, social concerns, and pragmatic results as stemming from the mystical consciousness, it is difficult to see how he can accept the drunken consciousness which produces the opposite effects."[139] In other words, James' own criteria for discerning an authentic mystical experience, judging the phenomenon by the fruits that it produces in the life of the one who undergoes the encounter, would forbid the "drunken state" to qualify as a genuine state of mystical consciousness; thus, failing the author's own test of discernment.

One may argue that the very topic, of intoxicants producing a mystical state, is something that deserves little, if any, serious attention as it is universally dismissed as a fallacious understanding of genuine mysticism today. However, it is important to note that there were serious attempts by eminent scholars in the twentieth century to convey an intoxicated state as

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[138] Ibid., 349.
[139] Egan, *What Are They Saying About Mysticism?*, 11.

one that belongs to the category of mystical or extraordinary experience, even leading to debates among academics. Thus, ignoring the issue would be unfruitful as it would ignore a hermeneutical framework that, no matter how irrelevant today, was taken seriously in various circles of the past.

Aldous Huxley, who also belongs to the perennialist tradition, wrote one of the most popular books on mysticism of the twentieth century with his work *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945). He also wrote *The Doors of Perception* (1954), in which Huxley made the controversial claim that psychedelic drugs can be used to produce extraordinary religious and mystical experiences.[140] Hence, we see traces of James' influence in incorporating intoxicants as mechanisms that can lead to states of mystical consciousness. R.C. Zaehner subsequently wrote the influential, albeit polemical, book *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* as a reaction and challenge to Huxley's work. Part of Huxley's theory argued that at the basis of all religions is the desire to escape from one's daily ego and surroundings, and psychedelic drugs have the power to put this goal into effect. Zaehner rejected Huxley's theory on religion and mysticism as erroneous, challenging his provocative claims.[141] Especially disconcerting to Zaehner was how Huxley was using the example of drug-induced states to support the perennial idea of a universal mystical experience that is present throughout cultures and religious traditions. Somewhat sarcastically, albeit sharply, Zaehner wrote of Huxley's thesis:

> for since he has proved that preternatural experience of the most vivid kind can be acquired by the taking of drugs and since the state of the drug-taker's consciousness bears

[140] McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, 559. See also ibid., Egan, 32.

[141] Zaehner wrote: "In *The Doors of Perception* Mr. Huxley seemed to assume that preternatural experiences, conveniently described by the all-embracing term 'mysticism,' must all be the same in essence, no matter whether they be the result of intensive ascetic training, of a prolonged course of Yoga techniques, or simply of the taking of drugs." Zaehner ironically articulated how drug-induced states have more in common with pathological states and, therefore, by abiding by his perennial notion that mystical states are universal, and that intoxicants also produce such states, Huxley was unwittingly flirting with the idea of reducing all seemingly mystical experiences to a paradigm of artificial and pathological states of consciousness. R.C. Zaehner, "Mysticism Sacred and Profane," in Richard Woods, *Understanding Mysticism*, 56-57; also see Egan, *What are They Saying about Mysticism?*, 32.

> at least a superficial resemblance to that of a religious mystic in that time and space appear to be transcended, must it not follow that this experience is "one and the same" as that of the generally accredited mystics?[142]

Zaehner observed that drugs like mescaline do have the effect of inducing vivid experiences; however, he noted that these *artificial* experiences have more in common with states of psychopathology than mysticism. He wrote:

> Huxley could, and should, have gone further. Mescaline is clinically used to produce artificially a state akin to schizophrenia, more specifically the manic phase of the manic-depressive psychosis. It must therefore follow, if we accept the fatal "platitude," [the perennial notion that mysticism is a universal experience throughout traditions] that not only can "mystical" experience be obtained artificially by the taking of drugs, it is also naturally present in the manic. It must then follow that the vision of God of the mystical saint is "one and the same" as the hallucination of the lunatic. There would appear to be no way out, unless the original "platitudinous" premise is unsound.[143]

Ingeniously, Zaehner was challenging Huxley's perennial philosophy by sharply noting the paradox, or contradiction, present therein. Huxley wanted to promulgate his idea of mysticism as universally authentic. Yet, to do so, he would have to acknowledge that other, namely pathological, states of consciousness, which have a lot in common with drug-induced states and the effects they produce, are also, by his standard, "mystical." That, of course, would be a self-defeating argument, jeopardizing the integrity of Huxley's thesis.

Even in the late-twentieth century we see with controversial figures like Timothy Leary, the Harvard psychologist who likewise advocated the usage of psychedelic drugs to induce purported mystical and religious experiences, traces of James' position in play. Today, however, serious scholars of mysticism as well as religious institutions who investigate mystical phenomena reject such notions, purposely perceiving the inclusion of any intoxicants as signs of false or inauthentic experiences which cannot come from a transcendent source for they are

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[142] Ibid., Zaehner, 57.
[143] Ibid.

artificially self-induced. When the Catholic Church investigates reports of visionary or apparitional experiences (cases of private revelation) a large amount of attention is given to the mental and psychological stability of the purported visionary.[144] Any signs of drug usage in the visionary which could produce hallucinatory or intoxicating effects constitute reasons to doubt the integrity of the alleged experience.

While James' stance on intoxicants makes for easy criticism today, it is noteworthy, as is evident, that there were scholars in the twentieth century who took such logic seriously in relation to states of mystical and religious consciousness.

Although, like James, Underhill is someone whose grasp and understanding of mysticism is recognized for its depth, her hermeneutic, like James', is not beyond reproach either. In Underhill's case especially interesting is her treatment of extraordinary phenomena like visions and apparitions. Let us consider this in some detail, as Underhill's hermeneutic on this subject speaks to a deeper question of interpretation, presenting a paradigm which has become prevalent in the study of extraordinary experiences: a hermeneutic of reductionism.

Critiquing Underhill:
Hermeneutical Reductionism

When Underhill presents the triune category of visions, she dedicates many pages to intellectual and imaginative visions while giving no attention to corporal visions. Underhill simply dismisses the latter as unimportant to the study of mysticism. The dismissal, as it is not supported by any presented research, appears to convey Underhill's personal biases toward such phenomena, specifically revealing her constructivist approach, a constructivism that, in this case, appears to be complete. This is interesting, for while Underhill is recognized as a perennial

[144] See Miravalle, *Private Revelation*, 39-44.

thinker her interpretation of corporal visions constitutes a hermeneutic of complete constructivism, as she reductively perceives such phenomena to be something fully constructed by the human mind.

"As to corporeal vision," Underhill writes, "it has few peculiarities of interest to the student of pure mysticism."[145] She then associates the alleged unimportance of corporal visions with their auditory counterpart in "exterior words," explaining: "Like the 'exterior word' it [a corporal vision] is little else than a more or less uncontrolled externalization of inward memories, thoughts, or intuitions – even of some pious picture which has become imprinted on the mind – which may, in some subjects, attain the dimensions of true sensorial hallucination."[146] That is all that Underhill writes of corporal visions.

Thus, Underhill attaches two characteristics to corporal visions, both of which fall into a hermeneutic of reductionism. The first, as mentioned, is constructivism, as Underhill sees such visions as externalizations of inner memories, thoughts, or intuitions; therefore, not phenomena which are *received* from outside, from Another, but phenomena which are *constructed* from within, from the self. Unlike aspects of imaginative visions, even *active* imaginative visions, like Catherine of Siena's "Mystic Marriage," wherein Underhill articulates a combination between divine inspiration and human construction in forming the content of the vision, here she applies a hermeneutic of *complete constructivism*, the corporal vision being a complete construction of the human psyche. The second characteristic that Underhill attaches to corporal visions, and here she is probably referring to certain, not all, occurrences, is pathology, as she associates certain corporal visions with reaching the depths of sensorial hallucination. Therefore, a constructivist

[145] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 220; edition cited in note 28.
[146] Ibid., 220.

and (occasionally) a pathological component are in play, according to Underhill's hermeneutic of such experiences.

Underhill is very much aware of the history of reductionism that has been present in interpreting extraordinary phenomena. She writes of this reality eloquently, with sharp knowledge, explaining that a debate between "two great powers" has been at the center of this hermeneutical battle. With regard to reductionism, Underhill writes of one side of the debate, the "strangely named rationalists," who, she explains:

> …feel that they have settled the matter once for all by calling attention to the obvious parallels which exist between the bodily symptoms of acute spiritual stress and the bodily symptoms of certain forms of disease. These considerations, reinforced by those comfortable words "auto-suggestion," "psychosensorial hallucination" and "association neurosis" – which do but reintroduce mystery in another and less attractive form – enable them to pity rather than blame the peculiarities of the great contemplatives. French psychology, in particular, revels in this sort of thing: and would, if it had its way, fill the wards of the Salpetriere with patients from the Roman Calendar.[147]

This is a reality which James also wrote about, and challenged with his work, deeming such hermeneutical reductionism as a form of "medical materialism," since, by this logic, a supposedly spiritual phenomenon is being reduced to a medical condition.[148] Thus, as with Underhill's allusion that the school of thought behind French psychology would place Roman saints into psychiatric wards, James mused very similarly in regards to this kind of reductionism. He wrote:

> Medical materialism seems indeed a good appellation for the too simple-minded system of thought which we are considering. Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa [of Avila] as an [*sic*] hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as an [*sic*] hereditary degenerate.[149]

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[147] Ibid., 210.
[148] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 20-21.
[149] Ibid., 20-21.

As we have noted, one of the trademarks of James' definition of mysticism is that the mystical consciousness transcends a rationalistic worldview, pointing to other, deeper dimensions of reality; thus pointing beyond the reductive frameworks that both James and Underhill challenged when considering how mystical experiences have been hermeneutically denigrated into pathological categories.

Notwithstanding, as mentioned, Underhill herself is not free of reductionism in her hermeneutic. Underhill takes a middle-ground approach. She referenced the "strangely named rationalists," on one side of the debate—with whose complete reductionism, or medical materialism (to apply James' phraseology), she disagrees—but, on the other side of the debate, she refers to those who apply a supernaturalist framework to every authentic visionary experience. Underhill also disagrees with this side, perceiving a proper interpretation of mystical phenomena as something which cannot be categorized as completely black-and-white but, on the contrary, as containing a lot of gray area. Underhill's critique of the "supernaturalist" side is, therefore, based on the fact that this perspective considers "the objective reality and absolute value of visions, voices, and other experiences"[150]while, in most cases, such phenomena are subjective and can also be symbolic. Underhill is not taking away from the authenticity of these experiences, but she is saying that they possess a nuanced subjectivity whose complexities cannot be ignored if we want to achieve proper interpretation and understanding.

Thus, to illustrate the point with a simple example, let us consider the example which we have already seen: Catherine of Siena's "Mystic Marriage." The rationalist (or medical materialist) would say that the vision is a construction of the mind, hallucinatory in nature; the supernaturalist would say that it is an objective experience of the supernatural; while Underhill's

[150] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 210; edition cited in note 28.

middle approach would say that it is an admixture of both, Catherine's imaginative faculties being used to construct the external content of the vision while the experience possessing the transformative, spiritual prowess which comes from an authentic encounter with the transcendent. Underhill makes the argument that supernaturalists would help their cause against reductionism by acknowledging the subjectivity of visionary or auditory phenomena, for such subjectivity can account for imperfections or discrepancies between the various experiences of saints or mystics without, through an absolutist framework, devaluing all such experiences as false or inauthentic.[151] In other words, Underhill is very critical of a hermeneutic of absolutism, which can come from either side, whether rationalist or supernaturalist, as she sees deeper complexity and nuance to most mystical experiences which speak of an obvious subjectivity that is in play during such encounters.

Underhill's discernment in distinguishing true from false experiences is, like James', based on the life-enhancing fruits that can be produced through such encounters. But, it is noteworthy that in the process of writing of those authentic experiences that lead to powerful conversions and life-changing results, those experiences which must come from a transcendent realm, Underhill reveals her prejudice toward other experiences, such as corporal visions, which she, without presenting evidence behind her case, reductively dismisses as being inauthentic. She writes of authentic, life-transforming visionary experiences—we can assume she is referring to

[151] Ibid., 210-212. Benedict Groeschel explains the various subjectivities that can lead even authentic revelations to contain errors. These include: "(a) faulty interpretation on the part of the recipient or others; (b) a tendency to use a revelation to write history rather than use it symbolically; (c) the tendency of the visionary to mix subjective expectations and preconceived ideas with the action of divine grace; (d) a subsequent altering or amplification of the testimony after the revelation; and (e) errors made in good faith by those who record the testimony." See Benedict J. Groeschel, C.F.R., *A Still, Small Voice*, 51. Groeschel's informative book is greatly indebted to the book by the Jesuit scholar Augustin Poulain, S.J., *The Graces of Interior Prayer* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950), which Groeschel acknowledges as the source for the aforementioned list.

intellectual and imaginative visions, which Underhill favors—although she does so by presenting a dubious contrast to corporal visionary experiences:

> Such visions [life-enhancing ones], it is clear, belong to another and higher plane of experience from the radiant appearances of our Lady, the piteous exhibitions of the sufferings of Christ, which swarm in the lives of the saints, and contain no feature which is not traceable to the subject's religious enthusiasm or previous knowledge. These, in the apt phrase of Godfernaux, are but "images floating on the moving deeps of feeling," not symbolic messages from another plane of consciousness.[152]

Therefore, Underhill continues:

> Some test, then, must be applied, some basis of classification discovered, if we are to distinguish the visions and voices which seem to be symptoms of real transcendental activity from those which are only due to imagination raised to the n th power, to intense reverie, or to psychic illness. That test, I think, must be the same as that which we shall find useful for ecstatic states; namely, their life-enhancing quality.[153]

Underhill's reductive approach toward such corporal visions as Marian apparitions—she mentions "radiant appearances of our Lady"—and mystical encounters of the Passion of Christ, both of which she refers to as experiences that contain no feature "which is not traceable to the subject's religious enthusiasm or previous knowledge," constitutes a hermeneutic of complete constructivism. Where Underhill's hermeneutic finds a shortcoming is in her seemingly predetermined conviction, which is twofold, that such experiences are always traceable to the subject's pre-existent knowledge and that such experiences do not produce life-enhancing fruits. Numerous examples of the lives of mystics and visionaries challenge these assumptions. Let us consider a couple examples.

The Case of Maria Valtorta

The Italian Catholic mystic Maria Valtorta (1897-1961) was a twentieth century visionary who reported experiencing visions of Jesus, Mary, the saints, and her guardian angel—

[152] Ibid., 212.
[153] Ibid.

corporal visions, as she described them as appearing to her externally in a three-dimensional manner. In addition to these corporal manifestations, Jesus apparently revealed to Valtorta his life in first-century Palestine, showing her countless scenes from his life as if they were happening right in front of her.[154] So vivid were these experiences that Valtorta even describes the smells of the scenes she was shown, in addition to the sights and sounds. Jesus apparently asked Valtorta to record all that she is being shown. The result was nearly 15,000 hand-written notebook pages, nearly two-thirds of which have been published in a multivolume work depicting the life of Christ. The original Italian edition was titled *The Gospel as It Was Revealed to Me*, while the English edition was re-titled *The Poem of the Man God*.[155] Many things stand out about Valtorta's multivolume work. One fascinating detail is the fact that scholars who have studied the work have noted that Valtorta correctly identifies obscure and *unknown* Palestinian locations, meaning places that were not known during Valtorta's years of writing (during the 1940s) but authenticated decades later (after Valtorta's death) through recent discoveries as, in fact, existing in first-century Palestine.[156] In other words, Valtorta's visionary experiences of Christ and his life in first-century Palestine recorded and conveyed *unknown knowledge*.

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[154] A short biography of Valtorta's experiences is recorded by Emilio Pisani in the preface of Maria Valtorta*, The Poem of the Man-God,* vol. 1, translated by Nicandro Picozzi and Patrick McLaughlin (Isola del Liri, Italy: Centro Editoriale Valtortiano, 1986), iv. Also see Maria Valtorta, *Autobiography*, translated by David G. Murray (Isola del Liri, Italy: Centro Editoriale Valtortiano, 1991).

[155] It is interesting to note that the publisher of Valtorta's work (Centro Editoriale Valtortiano) has recently re-titled the English edition to *The Gospel as It Was Revealed to Me*. This title seems more apt than *The Poem of the Man God* as Valtorta's revelations depict extensive and vivid accounts of the life of Jesus, working with prose not poetry to form a detailed narrative; albeit the beauty of the prose can be compared to poetry.

[156] See Daniel Klimek, "The Gospels According to Christ? Combining the Study of the Historical Jesus with Modern Mysticism," *Glossolalia*, vol. 1 (spring 2009): 8-9, accessed November 18, 2013, http://glossolalia.sites.yale.edu/. My article uses the research of David J. Webster, "Cities, Villages and Natural Geographical Sites in Palestine Mentioned in the Poem," originally accessed April 5, 2009, http://www.saveourchurch.org/descriptionspoem.pdf.

The Case of Therese Neumann

Let us also consider the example of the German Catholic mystic Therese Neumann (1898-1962). Neumann was another twentieth-century mystic, a contemporary of Valtorta's who died only one year after the Italian visionary. Neumann was a simple peasant woman coming from Bavaria. She reported experiencing visions of Christ and her body began manifesting the stigmata, purportedly supernatural wounds corresponding to the crucifixion marks of Jesus' body. The first recorded stigmatic in history was St. Francis of Assisi, who experienced the phenomenon in 1224. Neumann was also known for the mystical grace of *inedia*, the ability to be sustained for long periods of time by consuming no food other than the Eucharist. It is reported that she lived this way for decades, claiming not to consume any food, nor drink any water, other than receiving daily a consecrated host, from 1926 until her death in 1962. In July 1927, a medical doctor and four nurses kept watch over her during a two-week period for 24-hours a day, confirming that Neumann was not consuming anything but one consecrated host a day and astonishingly was not suffering any weight-loss, ill effects, or dehydration from this practice.[157] On Fridays she would often experience ecstatic visions of Christ's Passion, and her stigmata wounds would have strong manifestations during these experiences with blood pouring out of the wounds on her hands and feet as well as from her eyes. During some of these Passion ecstasies, witnesses, including priests and linguists, reported that she would utter phrases which were identifiable as constituting ancient Aramaic, a language that Neumann had no training in, or knowledge of; yet, it was the language that Jesus spoke during his life in first-century

[157] For an overview of Neumann's fasting and inedia, including the clinical examination of her status, see Josef Teodorowicz, *Mystical Phenomena in the Life of Theresa Neumann*, translated by Rudolph Kraus (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1940), 324-356. See also the work of Hilda C. Graef, *The Case of Therese Neumann* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1951).

Palestine.[158] Again, as with the case of Maria Valtorta, in Therese Neumann's case we have another example of a mystic's visionary experiences conveying *unknown knowledge.*

Underhill was particularly critical of mystical experiences that are Christocentric in their imagery, particularly corporal visions that may appear like "piteous exhibitions of the sufferings of Christ" or Marian apparitions, pointing to Christ's mother. Such experiences, she emphasized, "contain no feature which is not traceable to the subject's" previous religious knowledge (thus his or her pre-existent beliefs).[159] The experiences of both Maria Valtorta and Therese Neumann challenge Underhill's point, posing a substantial argument to its validity. Both women – Valtorta and Neumann – it should be noted, experienced "piteous exhibitions of the sufferings of Christ" (Valtorta, in fact, vividly depicts the Passion in over one hundred pages of detail in her visionary writings) and both women are known for producing knowledge from their visionary encounters that was not previously known to them or, in Valtorta's case, to anyone; in other words, knowledge that cannot be traced back to "the subject's religious enthusiasm or previous knowledge" (to use Underhill's phrasing).

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[158] Ibid., Teodorowicz, see 469-503. This chapter (XIX) is titled "Phenomena of Speech." Specifically pages 473-477 record Neumann's Aramaic during her ecstasies, documenting investigations made by linguists and clergy that were present at her side during the phenomenon. The American stigmatic Rhoda Wise (1888-1948) was reported to experience similar phenomena as identified in Neumann's case, including the identifiable uttering of Aramaic phrases during her ecstasies. See Karen Sigler, *Her Name Means Rose: The Rhoda Wise Story* (Birmingham: EWTN Catholic Publishing, 2000). My appreciation to Fr. Sean Sullivan, T.O.R., for pointing me to information on Therese Neumann, and to Br. Gabriel Mary Amato, T.O.R., for pointing me to the case of Rhoda Wise.

[159] Underhill, *Mysticism* (as in note 28), 212. It is important to note that Underhill's skepticism in her early work in regard to Christocentric corporal visions may be a reflection of her own spiritual beliefs at the time, which were at odds with her later spiritual development. By 1921, Fanning explains, Underhill had a spiritual director in Baron Friedrich von Hügel, himself a prominent English author of mysticism, whose influence on her spiritual life would be significant. "Underhill had known von Hügel, the foremost Catholic theologian in England, for more than a decade and now, under his direction, her spiritual life took a decidedly Christocentric turn." This Christocentric turn would be so great that Underhill would state that von Hügel "compelled me to experience Christ," making various references in her personal notebooks of spiritual experiences of God that were Christ-centered ("and within this glow of God one sees Jesus"). As cited in Fanning, *Mystics of the Christian Tradition*, 211. For von Hügel's most eminent work on mysticism see Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion: As Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (New York, NY: Herder & Herder, 1999); originally published in 1908 and revised in 1923.

The claim that Underhill made about such corporal, Christocentric visions is that they do not come from a higher plane of consciousness, and therefore are not an example of genuine transcendent activity, but are completely constructed by the human imagination. Nonetheless, we see in evidence from the lives of two modern mystics, thus two modern examples, that such a theory is open to dispute. Underhill, however, presupposing such visionary experiences to be fully human in their origin, called for some criteria of discernment to distinguish them from the true, transcendent experiences. As noted, she emphasized the life-enhancing quality, thus the fruits of genuine experiences, as essential to discerning true from false mystical encounters. However, in the process of presupposing most corporal visions to be fully constructed and calling, therefore, for a measure of discernment to be found in the life-enhancing quality of an experience, Underhill was implying that most corporal visions—again, specifying examples such as Marian apparitions or manifestations of Christ's Passion—do not possess life-enhancing qualities. This is the case as life-enhancing fruit constituted the litmus test of discernment, and as Underhill already discerned (or, perhaps more aptly, predetermined) that corporal visions are not transcendent experiences. Therefore, they cannot be life-enhancing.

Such a proposition, or presupposition, is also easily challenged through various examples of major visionary experiences. If we consider Marian apparitions, a study of the apparitions of Our Lady of Lourdes in 1858 will show that they had a strong, life-enhancing impact on the young visionary Bernadette Soubirous, as did the apparitions of Our Lady of Fatima in 1917 on the three shepherd children.[160] Life-enhancing, spiritual fruits have become such a hallmark of

[160] Both Bernadette Soubirous (1844-1879) of Lourdes and Lucia dos Santos (1907-2005), the main visionary of Fatima, would become cloistered nuns, their apparitional experiences having a deep religious influence on their lives. The other two visionaries of Fatima, siblings Jacinta (1910-1920) and Francisco Marto (1908-1919), died at a young age due to the 1918 influenza epidemic that killed millions. For accounts of both the Lourdes and Fatima apparitions, see Sandra L. Zimdar-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: From La Salette to Medjugorje* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), esp. 43-56, 77-91, 190-219.

genuine apparition cases, of discerning the true from the false, that in its main document on discerning such phenomena the Catholic Church considers, as one key criterion, the "abundant and constant spiritual fruit" that is produced by authentic apparitions.[161] This abundant and constant fruit does not only refer to spiritual fruit within the visionary's life but also in the lives of the countless devotees, sometimes this can include millions of pilgrims, who are affected and changed by the presence of the apparition and the devotion cultivated at the site of the apparition. The understanding is that if the phenomenon originates from God, from a divine source, then that will be shown by an abundance of spiritual fruit, life-transforming fruit that it produces; if it does not come from God, then that life-enhancing fruit will be absent and, even, detrimental consequences can result from such experiences, producing negative effects.[162] The point here is that spiritual fruit have become such a standard hallmark of major apparition cases, especially within the widely-present phenomena of Marian apparitions, that Underhill's claim that such experiences cannot be genuine encounters with a transcendent realm falls short of substance. If we specifically consider this reasoning against Underhill's own criteria of discernment, that an experience can be judged by its fruit, then, as we saw with the case of James and intoxicants, in many examples of apparitions Underhill fails her own test of discernment.

Interestingly, as with Marian apparitions and visions of Christ's crucifixion in the lives of saints and mystics, Underhill also reveals a reductive skepticism toward alleged encounters with, or manifestations of, the demonic. Hermeneutically speaking, the problem is not that there is a

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[161] See Francis Cardinal Šeper, "Norms Regarding the Manner of Proceeding in the Discernment of Presumed Apparitions or Revelations." *Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, February 24, 1978, accessed November 18, 2013, <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20111214_prefazione-levada_en.html.> These Norms were formally approved by Pope Paul VI on February 24, 1978, but only made public during Pope Benedict XVI's papacy on December 14, 2011. Previously, they were treated as an "in-house" document, being available only to bishops who requested the Norms in light of reports of private revelation in their dioceses.

[162] Ibid.

skepticism toward such ominous visionary claims but that, in Underhill's case, there is no evidence offered (whether empirical or philosophical) to justify the skepticism, specifically the denigration of such experiences into pathological categories. Underhill writes:

> When Julian of Norwich in her illness saw the "horrible showing" of the Fiend, red with black freckles, which clutched at her throat with its paws: when St. Teresa was visited by Satan, who left a smell of brimstone behind, or when she saw him sitting on the top of her breviary and dislodged him by the use of holy water: it is surely reasonable to allow that we are in the presence of visions which tend towards the psychopathic type, and which are expressive of little else but an exhaustion and temporary loss of balance on the subject's part, which allowed her intense consciousness of the reality of evil to assume a concrete form.[163]

In a footnote, Underhill writes similarly of Catherine of Siena's alleged experiences with the demonic, enunciating:

> Thus too in the case of St. Catherine of Siena, the intense spiritual strain of that three years' retreat which I have already described (supra, Pt. II, Cap 1.) showed itself towards the end of the period by a change in the character of her visions. These, which had previously been wholly concerned with the intuitions of the good and the beautiful, now took on an evil aspect and greatly distressed her. . . . We are obliged to agree with [James] Pratt that such visions as these are "pathological phenomena quite on a level with other hallucinations."[164]

In all three cases referenced here, that of Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, and Catherine of Siena, Underhill postulates that "exhaustion," a "temporary loss of balance," and "intense spiritual strain" must have been responsible for producing visions of "the psychopathic type," of "pathological phenomena" that should be considered hallucinatory (ibid). The problem is that Underhill produces no evidence, nor gives any arguments, explaining why visionary manifestations of evil have to be considered pathological. She writes of a meaningful transition that Catherine's visions have made, from concentration on the good and the beautiful to evil, and claims that intense spiritual stress must have produced this allegedly pathological transition in

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[163] Underhill, *Mysticism* (as in note 28), 212.
[164] Ibid., 232, n. 572.

Catherine's visionary encounters. However, again, the issue is that Underhill provides no reasoning to substantiate or support the claim as to why this visionary transition toward evil has to be deemed "pathological" or hallucinatory.

Why, in other words, can Catherine and the aforementioned mystics not have real visionary manifestations of evil? It may be that Underhill is restricting the spiritual realm to the *good*, to a benevolent, transcendent source and, therefore, perceiving strong manifestations of the demonic as a sign of inauthentic experiences, reductively dismissing them as pathological without providing any explanation for her diagnosis. However, it is interesting how Underhill immediately associates manifestations of concrete evil with pathology, not even considering the question of cultural constructivism, meaning mentally constructed experiences which, stemming from pre-existent knowledge, are more a product of culture than hysteria. Here we see another shortcoming of her hermeneutic.

It is ironic, considering, as we have observed, that Underhill is very critical of an unhealthy absolutism that is present in the views of both rationalists and supernaturalists, the former denying all mystical phenomena while the latter perceiving objectivity behind all genuine mystical phenomena. However, in the case of corporal visions, whether of the sacred or the profane, Underhill herself appears to fall into an absolutist hermeneutic, the type that she criticizes in rationalists. Her dismissal of Marian or Christocentric corporal visions as culturally constructed phenomena, and her dismissal of Satanic or demonic manifestations as pathological phenomena, without substantiating these reductive claims, reveal a rationalist tendency that seems to be based more on preconceived ideas than empirical evidence.

A Holistic Approach:

The Case of Gemma Galgani

More holistic approaches have been formulated, incorporating theories of the pathological and the demonic alongside the authentic experience. In an introduction to the writings of the modern mystic Gemma Galgani (1878-1903), a young Italian woman and Catholic saint who experienced visions, ecstasies, and the stigmata of Christ, Harvey Egan notes how diverse and multifaceted the experiences of mystics may be. He also notes the long history of spiritual warfare as a present reality within the lives of the mystics, even starting with Christ himself, with an obvious emphasis on the presence of authentic evil in the form of Satan:

> Jesus defined part of his mission in terms of defeating Satan. St. Paul maintained that the Christian life involves the warfare not only against "flesh and blood," but also against principalities and powers. Many mystics in the Christian tradition experienced Satan's attempt to thwart their union with God. The selections [of her writings] indicate that Gemma was no exception.[165]

Gemma Galgani was a twentieth-century mystic, showing how the recognition of the presence of spiritual warfare with evil, sometimes manifested in concrete forms, has been realized throughout Christian history, from the very beginning (considering the experiences of Jesus) to the present time.[166]

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[165] Harvey Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism* (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo Books, 1996), 524.

[166] The examples of twenty-first century Christians reporting encounters with the devil have not been absent. Mirjana Dragicevic-Soldo, one of the six Medjugorje visionaries, is a visionary who has reported an apparitional encounter with—thus, a corporal vision of—the devil. Similarly, Catholic exorcists have reported various paranormal phenomena in their work which they connect with the devil or the demonic. Additionally, mystics, visionaries, and near-death-experiencers have reported encounters with the afterlife, which have included the realm of hell and manifestations of the demonic. For a description of her experience, see interview with Mirjana Dragicevic-Soldo in Svetozar Kralijevic, O.F.M., *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje, 1981-1983: A Historical Account with Interviews*, edited by Michael Scanlan, T.O.R. (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1984), 125-126. For an insightful study of demonic possession and exorcism within the historical context of early-modern Catholicism, see Moshe Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism, and Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Especially insightful is Sluhovsky's hermeneutical discourse on the various interpretations of possession that modern scholars apply, including psychological, anthropological, sociological, and spiritual frameworks, found on pages 1-10. For a brief but informative study of demonology and the ministry of exorcism by a Vatican-approved exorcist, see José Antonio Fortea, *Interview with an Exorcist: An Insider's Look at the Devil, Demonic Possession, and the Path to Deliverance*

Regarding the multifaceted nature of the experiences of mystics, particularly the sources of these experiences, Egan writes: "The mystic experiences genuine, pathological, and diabolical phenomena during the course of her mystical life."[167] Egan recognizes this reality in the life of Gemma Galgani, emphasizing that God-given, mystical experiences "never occur alone."[168] In other words, a mystic who has genuine, God-given experiences, such as divine visions, may also receive both demonic and pathological experiences. Again, there is a lot of gray area and subjectivity when dealing with such experiences, it is not always black-and-white. Gemma Galgani, Egan notes, "experienced more secondary mystical phenomena than any other mystic in the Christian tradition."[169] By "secondary mystical phenomena" Egan means extraordinary experiences that surpass natural explanation. He lists that "Gemma experienced numerous trinitarian, Christ-centered, Marian, and eucharistic illuminations. Raptures, ecstasies, seraphic wounds of love, visions, locutions, the *complete* stigmata, bloody sweat, tears of blood, mystical effluvia (perfumed bodily secretions), satanic attacks, and penetrating discernment of spirits…."[170]

In considering the case of Gemma Galgani, Egan makes the argument that she experienced three types of phenomena: genuine, diabolical, *and pathological*. Egan writes that these "phenomena reveal not only Gemma's God-induced psychosomatic integration, but also her brokenness and the presence of the demonic." Therefore, taken together, "these phenomena

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(West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2006). Fortea is an internationally-known Spanish exorcist who has done scholarly work, primarily in Spanish, on the topic of exorcism and demonology. For an interesting study comparing the visions of the afterlife that the Medjugorje visionaries have reported to receive of heaven, hell, and purgatory, with visions of the afterlife that near-death experiencers have reported, see Carl R. Lundahl, "A Comparison of Other World Perceptions by Near-Death Experiencers and by the Marian Visionaries of Medjugorje," in *Journal of Near-Death Studies,* 19 (1) Fall 2000, 45-52.

[167] Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 525.

[168] Ibid.

[169] Ibid., 521.

[170] Ibid., 522.

manifest God's presence, the devil's presence, and Gemma's own healthy and pathological accommodations and resistances to both the divine and the demonic presence."[171] Egan hints at elements of a psychoanalytical diagnosis, on the one hand, and genuine fruits of mystical experience, on the other hand, in considering the conditions recorded in the religious experiences of Gemma's life. He enunciates:

> Furthermore, it is not surprising that some of these phenomena may reflect Gemma's infantile dreams, inordinate desires, immature projections, and pathological hallucinations. However, others directly countered Gemma's physically, psychologically, and morally pernicious tendencies. Conversion, renewed energy, strength, courage, authority, and peace accompanied them. They bestowed insight, knowledge, and wisdom upon her and deepened her faith, hope, and love.
>
> The Christian mystics unanimously teach that genuine God-induced extraordinary phenomena leave behind in their wake faith, hope, love, humility, heroic virtue, and peace. The enhancement of life at all levels of the person's being attests to their authenticity. They both produce and flow from holiness.[172]

Thus, here we see a more holistic hermeneutic, wherein a mystic is not reductively categorized into a single label—whether identified as someone who is insane, possessed, or genuine—but where a multifariousness is acknowledged within the realm of experiences belonging to the mystic. There is no reason, as Egan argues in the case of Gemma Galgani, as to why a mystic cannot have genuine experiences that come from a transcendent source and also have experiences that are genuinely diabolical or pathological. What is in play here is a recognition of the complexity of the human person, as body, mind, and soul, and the acknowledgment that the various faculties of the person may, at times but not always, be affected by different sources of influence.

Let us conclude this point by looking at a similar observation that Benedict Groeschel makes about the visionary and auditory experiences of Joan of Arc. He enunciates:

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[171] Ibid., 525.
[172] Ibid.

> She said she spoke to the saints, when what she really saw were statues. But they spoke to her. Was she crazy? I don't know. I do know that she stopped the longest war in European history. Winston Churchill, no less, said of Joan, "There is no purer figure in all of European history for a thousand years." Freud, on the other hand, called her a schizophrenic. Who's right? . . . Was she both mad and blessed? It's entirely possible. . . . Entirely possible.[173]

Summary

Both William James and Evelyn Underhill are pioneers in the study of mystical experiences, producing two of the most influential books of the twentieth-century on the subject. They each had their own definition as to what constitutes true mysticism. In his study of religion, James emphasized experience, having a significant impact on influencing an experientialist turn in the study of religion in the West which stressed the importance of individual experience over institutional or theological discourses. James focused on elevated states of mystical consciousness as the basis of religion and as a challenge to the predominant, rationalist worldview that reduces knowledge to sense perception of the empirical. James argued for a deeper faculty of perception in the human being, a faculty which is able to grasp higher truths; it is this faculty that he referred to as the "mystical consciousness," giving it four marks or characteristics of identity. He was unique as a psychologist who took religious experience seriously, using psychological categories to study such experiences empirically while pointing to the reality that something "more" is present in such states of consciousness, a deeper dimension of being whose depths psychology, or any human science, cannot fully grasp.

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[173] As quoted in Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 423. Joan of Arc is a figure whose reported visionary and auditory experiences have often been the victim of reductive interpretations which denigrate the integrity of her encounters through pathological diagnosis, notwithstanding the incredible results that came from Joan's experiences. Sydney Callahan explains: "But even Joan the heroic maid, despite her extraordinary meteoric achievements and down-to-earth common sense, has been diagnosed as neurotic or psychotic by secular thinkers. At the end of the nineteenth century the famous French novelist [Emile] Zola could dub Joan a 'hysterical peasant girl whose dreamy-eyed interpreters were ignoring the scientific truth.'" See Sidney Callahan, *Women Who Hear Voices: The Challenge of Religious Experience.* 2003 Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality at St. Mary's College, Notre Dame, IN. (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 7-8.

Underhill, on the other hand, did not want to leave the experience of mysticism at the level of an elevated state of consciousness, but perceived mysticism in a broader framework as a complete way of life: the "mystic way," she famously called this all-encompassing spiritual path, this lifestyle of a dynamic relationship between the soul and the transcendent. Underhill's emphasis distinguished her hermeneutic from many prominent interpreters who took James as a model. Egan explains: "By delineating mysticism as a way of life which focuses exclusively on loving God and seeking union with Him, Underhill clearly distinguishes herself from commentators who emphasize mysticism as a series of unrelated psychological peak experiences, or as altered states of consciousness."[174]

Like James, Underhill was also critical of a narrow rationalism that refuses to acknowledge a transcendent realm, the realm of the mystics. She was critical of absolutism, however both in the rationalist and the supernaturalist camps, calling for a more nuanced subjectivity in understanding the complexities of mystical experiences. While Underhill did articulate such a nuanced understanding of mystical experiences, it is not difficult to see that her hermeneutic was not free itself from absolutist proclivities which conveyed a rationalist tendency toward certain forms of visionary experience.

Moreover, the lives of various modern mystics, from Therese Neumann to Maria Valtorta and Gemma Galgani, and the various phenomena they experienced provide substantial challenges to aspects of Underhill's interpretation, particularly her constructivist and rationalist approaches toward corporal visions. In this area, which would incorporate Marian apparitions, Underhill exuded a reductionism that is not uncommon of thinkers who are complete skeptics of mystical experiences. Let us turn to some of these thinkers, and consider in greater depth the

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[174] Egan, *What Are They Saying About Mysticism?*, 49.

history of reductionism that mystical experiences have been subjected to in the twentieth century, as various hermeneutical frameworks have been advanced for the purpose of explaining away extraordinary religious experiences with other, alternative explanations. It is within this discourse that we will enter upon the constructivist-perennialist debate.

Chapter 2
The Great Debate

Throughout the twentieth century an academic debate between scholars of extraordinary religious experiences has emerged, concentrating on the best paradigm to use in order to understand the essence of extraordinary experiences. The two dominant schools of thought, or theories of interpretation, to materialize from this hermeneutical debate have been the perennial philosophical tradition and the constructivist tradition.

The perennial model, which will be examined shortly, was the preeminent lens for interpreting extraordinary religious experiences throughout the first half of the twentieth century, producing works from various scholars in both popular and academic culture. Prominent perennial thinkers in religious studies have included William James, Evelyn Underhill, Aldous Huxley, Rudolf Otto, Joseph Marechal, S.J., Frithjof Schuon, W.T. Stace and Huston Smith, to name a few.[1] The perennial approach to religious experience, however, came under attack in the latter half of the twentieth century when a group of scholars, in the 1970s and '80s particularly, began undermining perennial interpretations through the lens of constructivism, as an alternative (and allegedly a more suitable) hermeneutical approach to understanding religious and mystical experiences.

Constructivists include such scholars as R.C. Zaehner, Bruce Garside, Steven Katz, Robert Gimello, H.P. Owen, and Hans H. Penner, among others, as well as their precursors, seen

[1] In addition to the already-mentioned works of James and Underhill, see Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944, rpt. 1945, 1970); Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923, rpt. 1950) and *Mysticism East and West*, trans. Bertha Bracey and Richenda C. Payne (New York: Macmillan, 1932); Joseph Marechal, S.J., *Studies in the Psychology of the Mystics*, trans. Algar Thorold (London: Burns Oakes & Washburne, 1927); Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, trans. Peter Townsend (New York: Harper, 1975); W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillian, 1960); Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

in the earlier works of thinkers like Dean Inge and Rufus Jones.[2] The debate between perennialists and constructivists has heated up in recent years, entering into the twenty-first century through renewed developments in the perennialist approach advanced by a new generation of scholars, often known as "neo-perennialists." Before examining these developments, let us begin by exploring the main ideas of hermeneutical interpretation under the traditional perennial philosophy, with its earlier roots.

Perennialism

Perennial thinkers have emphasized the cross-cultural and trans-historical unity of extraordinary religious and mystical experiences. Perennial interpretations, in an ecumenical fashion as the kind portrayed by James, have argued that persons from different religious and cultural backgrounds share immensely similar spiritual experiences. This mutuality, according to perennial logic, has been the case throughout the centuries.[3]

There are remarkable parallels between the language, symbols, and concepts used by persons in cross-cultural settings, reporting similar spiritual phenomena while partaking in diverse religious practices from various faith traditions. For example, in terms of cultivated experiences, intense Christian prayer can lead to a similar (if not identical) spiritual experience

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[2] See R.C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961) and *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969); Bruce Garside, "Language and the Interpretation of Mystical Experiences," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 3 (Summer 1972), 91-94. An especially influential essay leading the constructivist critique of the perennial philosophy has been Steven Katz's "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 22-74; see also Robert Gimello, "Mysticism and Meditation," 170-199, both in Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. See also Gimello's "Mysticism in its Contexts," 61-88, and Hans H. Penner, "The Mystical Illusion," 89-116, both in Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*. The other works edited by Katz, in his four volume corpus on mysticism, include *Mysticism and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). For the earlier constructivist hermeneutics of Inge and Jones, see W.R. Inge, "Ecstasy" in James Hastings, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912), 157; and Rufus M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1909, reprinted 1970).

[3] See R.L. Franklin's essay "Postconstructivist Approaches to Mysticism," 231-243, in Forman, *The Innate Capacity*. For more on the perennial perspective, also see Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 31-32.

for a Christian as Buddhist meditation can for a Buddhist, according to perennial logic. Hence, according to scholar R.L. Franklin, perennialism "presents mysticism as involving a state of consciousness found in virtually all religions, recognizably the same in each, and acknowledged by those who have eyes to see as the highest goal of the religious quest."[4] Thus, the emphasis here is on a universal spiritual experience discernable in every religious tradition through the unifying qualities of a powerful altered state of consciousness: again, what James called the "mystical state of consciousness."

A couple of major criticisms have emerged of the perennial perspective. Robert Forman, whose own post-constructivist approach to extraordinary experiences has much in common with traditional perennial philosophy, does acknowledge that the perennial view has become easy to attack by constructivists for two reasons. First, the institutional academic paradigm in the humanities has shifted to a constructivist understanding of knowledge, fueling the notion that language and cultural background fully shape human experience – as is apparent in fields like anthropology, sociology and, often, history – and, therefore, undermining the idea of a pure, unmediated experience. Religious studies, including the study of mysticism and other extraordinary religious experiences, have also been subjected to this intellectual shift.[5] Second, Forman acknowledges that many eminent perennial thinkers have partaken in sloppy and (therefore) irresponsible scholarship which has not been difficult to refute and discredit – even by neo-perennialists like Forman himself. Forman explains:

> For example, Rudolf Otto's *Mysticism East and West* was an attempt to draw parallels between the mystical writings of Shankara and Meister Eckhart. Otto was rightly criticized for misrepresenting both, however. Shankara's key notions of *maya*, superimposition, the two forms of Brahman, and other technical terms were never given clear exposition by Otto, and thus the distinctiveness of his philosophy was muddled. Similarly, little of the nuance of Eckhart's doctrines of the Birth of the Word, of the

[4] Frankiln, "Postconstructivist Approaches," 231.
[5] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 31.

> boiling up (*ebullition*) of the Godhead, or of the breakthrough (*durchbruch*) were ever clarified; again, what made Eckhart distinctive was lost. Aldous Huxley, in his renowned *Perennial Philosophy*, quoted little bits and pieces out of context from one mystic after another; in his zeal to make them seem identical, he offered little if any exegesis of any of them.[6]

Forman, therefore, concludes: "Perennialists like these thus benuded [*sic*] the individual mystics and mystical traditions of their specific teachings. The various traditions seemed to disappear into some bland, characterless anonymity."[7] Of course, this does not mean that all perennial thinkers have been guilty of such impoverished scholarship. As has been already noted, even Bernard McGinn, a constructivist and, arguably, the preeminent historian of mysticism in the world, has recognized the contributions of perennial scholars like Evelyn Underhill in introducing the subject of mysticism into the public sphere.

William Parsons has argued that, within recent surveys of perennialist scholarship, one can "ascertain at least three subtypes" of perennialism.[8] Parsons identifies these specific subtypes as 1) the perennial invariant model; 2) the perennial variant model; and 3) the typological variant model. Let us consider these.

The Perennial Invariant

The first model, according to Parsons, posits that all extraordinary religious and mystical experiences are composed of the same core characteristics and are expressed in spiritual texts through presentations that are so similar, from one to the other, as to transcend all cultural, religious, and linguistic influences and boundaries. This is the perennial invariant model.[9]

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[6] Ibid., 32.
[7] Ibid., 32.
[8] Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling*, 112-113
[9] Ibid., 113.

The Perennial Variant

The second subtype of perennialism, the perennial variant model, argues (like the first) that the underlying characteristics of extraordinary experiences are the same; however, this model argues that religious and cultural traditions do have an influence on the mode, or form, of expression with which the experiences are conveyed.[10] Thus similar, if not identical, religious and mystical experiences can be conveyed in a diverse manner through spiritual texts, contingent on the traditions influencing the writer of the text. Core characteristics of the experiences are similar but the subsequent modes of interpretation applied to the experiences, by diverse religious and cultural traditions, give specific expressions of these encounters, expressions that are culturally filtered and can, therefore, be different in representation. Therefore, there is a *similarity of content* between extraordinary experiences but *diversity in form* of expression.[11]

The Typological Variant

The third subtype of perennialism identified by Parsons is the typological variant model. This model postulates that both the content and the form of expression of extraordinary experiences have variations which are affected by the religious and cultural influences of the individual. In other words, neither the content of the experience nor its form of expression is pure but both are mediated through pre-existent factors.[12]

Though the first two subtypes identified by Parsons, the "perennial variant" and the "perennial invariant," are convincing articulations as two interpretative frameworks within the perennialist hermeneutic, the third subtype, the typological variant, is less convincing. The issue is that if this subtype sees both the content and the form of extraordinary religious experiences as being culturally conditioned then it views experience under a lens that sees more hermeneutical

[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

commonality with the constructivist framework rather than the perennialist. The key here is the *content* of religious experience. The *form* may be culturally influenced for a hermeneutic to be understood as perennial (as the perennial variant subtype articulates); however, if the *content* of the experience is culturally conditioned then the hermeneutic that applies this interpretation could be considered *constructivist*, as such an interpretation constitutes a key characteristic of the constructivist thesis in regard to religious experiences.

When Robert Forman writes of "the constructivist thesis," he explains what it is by contrasting it to perennialism as a framework for understanding religious experiences. He cites Steven Katz as the foremost proponent of this type of hermeneutic:

> Now, like his fellow constructivists, Katz is making an epistemologically heavy claim. He is not asserting that previously held beliefs and concepts will come into play only in the postexperiential shaping of the descriptions and texts [of mystical experiences], but rather that they will play their role in the shaping of the actual mystical experience(s) themselves.[13]

In other words, it is not only post-experiential interpretations of mystical experiences, thus the form, that are culturally conditioned, according to this view, but, even previously, the actual shaping of the experience and thus the content. This constitutes the core characteristic of a constructivist hermeneutic in understanding religious experience and, therefore, it is not unreasonable to assess that Parsons makes an impoverished argument in identifying such a hermeneutic within a perennialist category, as the "typological variant" model. Once the content of an experience is understood as being culturally conditioned then the interpretation's outlook possesses the tenets of constructivism.

Let us now turn to constructivism and explore its tenets with greater depth, as constructivist criticisms of the perennial philosophical approach to religious experience have

[13] Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, 12.

been influential, highly affecting the contemporary path of religious studies, and as the constructivist approach makes significant contributions to discourses on religious experience.

Constructivism

The hermeneutic of constructivism,[14] in religion as well as in other disciplines of study within the humanities, argues that experience is not unmediated but based on a number of preexistent circumstances. Thus, if we were to study the cases of mystics, the spiritual experiences that such individuals—whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu—report would be highly shaped by the socio-religious, economic, cultural, and linguistic traditions, circumstances, and expectations that form their backgrounds; and, due to such differing backgrounds, there are significant differences in the spiritual experiences which such individuals report. Therefore, unlike the perennialists, constructivists do not necessarily concentrate on a spiritual unity in mysticism but on a religious pluralism which acknowledges the differences of each mystical tradition on the basis of preexisting, cultural contexts influencing their experiences.[15] Forman calls this the "pluralism thesis" and explains that the "pluralism thesis is important to these [constructivist] authors as it is their response to the

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[14] It has been suggested that constructivist scholars should be called "contextualists"—and not "constructivists"—as their major project is to contextualize the experiences of mystics; however, the usage of the label "constructivists" is preferred in this writing, as neo-perennialists and many traditional perennialists also believe in the contextualization of mystical experiences; thus contextualism by itself would not constitute the major hermeneutical difference between the two and, therefore, would not properly constitute a distinguishing marker in identifying one side over the other. The central issue does not pertain to contextualism but to the proper placing of contextualism within the phenomenology of a mystical experience, whether it is placed in the content or the form of the experience; if it is placed entirely in the beginning, in the shaping of content itself, then the experience is *constructed* and that becomes the central epistemological issue of debate: not that one side contextualizes and the other does not—as both sides, to some extent, do—but that one side argues for an experience *constructed* by the self while the other for an experience *received* from Another; essentially becoming a debate between constructivism and receptivity. For discussion, see Nelstrop, Magill, and Onishi, *Christian Mysticism*, 11, n. 21. The authors here use "contextualists" to refer to constructivist scholars and argue for such usage. However, for the aforementioned reasons, I believe that "constructivists" is the more suitable label.

[15] The foremost proponent of the constructivist model for interpreting religious and mystical experiences has been Steven T. Katz. Katz, as previously cited, has edited four volumes on the subject, presenting various essays by constructivist scholars that promulgate the approach to extraordinary religious and mystical experiences.

perennial philosophers' arguments that mysticism is by and large the same across time and tradition."[16]

Interestingly, the constructivist perspective can be epistemologically understood through Immanuel Kant's philosophy of knowledge and history. Kant, as we will shortly see, provides the philosophical foundations for constructivism. Kant argued that no historical object can be observed without a process of mediation, serving as a subjective filtering mechanism between the individual and his or her object of study.[17] In essence, that is what the constructivists are arguing about religion and, particularly, mystical experiences. A mystical experience cannot be understood properly as an unmediated experience, for it is always mediated and, therefore, highly influenced by an individual's cultural context and by the filtering structures of the mind. Thus the mystical experience of a Christian will be significantly different from that of a Buddhist due to the different cultural context and religious tradition that each is operating from, and due to the conditioned structure of the mind that precludes unmediated experiences, Kant would articulate. Steven Katz, as the foremost proponent of the constructivist approach to religious experiences, has, as a result of the epistemologically Kantian connection, developed the reputation of being a neo-Kantian thinker.[18]

The most influential work of the twentieth century to challenge the perennial philosophical approach to mysticism was *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, published in 1978 as a collection of essays by constructivist scholars.[19] The work was edited by Katz who himself contributed two influential essays to the collection. Katz continued the constructivist crusade with the subsequent publication of *Mysticism and Language*, another edited work

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[16] Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, 10-11.
[17] See Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography*: *An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 20-21.
[18] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 34.
[19] See note 45 of the first chapter.

bringing constructivist scholars together, this time not simply to challenge the perennial philosophy but, emblematic of the linguistic turn, also to explore further the significant position of language in the study of religious and mystical experiences. In his introductory essay to the work, Katz makes a bold statement on the importance of language and contextualization in understanding mystical experiences:

> It is my view…that mystical reports do not merely indicate the postexperiential description of an unreportable experience in the language closest at hand. Rather, the experiences themselves are inescapably shaped by prior linguistic influences such that the lived experience conforms to a preexistent pattern that has been learned, then intended, and then actualized in the experiential reality of the mystic.[20]

Katz's proclamation is bold exactly *because* he emphasizes that mystical experiences are shaped by *prior* linguistic influences. In other words, Katz is postulating that it is the prior cultural and linguistic context that formulates the experience, not the other way around, a core characteristic of constructivism (seeing conceptual shaping in the content of the experience). Such a claim is bold to many perennial thinkers as it threatens the authenticity and dignity of the reported experience, denigrating it. However, it is important to point out that, as with perennialism, there are variations of constructivism.

Forman has argued that there are "two or three possible interpretations of the constructivist model."[21] He presents three variations, distinguishing them as "complete constructivism," "incomplete constructivism," and "catalytic constructivism."[22]

Complete Constructivism

Complete constructivism, according to Forman, constitutes a model of interpretation wherein the mystical experience is "one hundred percent shaped, determined, and provided" by

[20] Steven Katz, "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning" in *Mysticism and Language*, 5.
[21] Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, 13.
[22] Ibid., 13-14.

the pre-existent set of beliefs and expectations (thus, the content) of the individual, to the point where it can become a hallucination. A hallucination may be "one such example," Forman explains. He cites the work of the constructivist Robert Gimello in articulating this hermeneutic. Gimello argued that mystical experiences are simply "the psychosomatic enhancement of religious beliefs and values or of the beliefs and values of other kinds which are held 'religiously'."[23] In other words, by "psychosomatic enhancement," Gimello is claiming that such experiences are complete constructions of the human mind without any spiritual foundation to them. This model completely undermines the integrity of extraordinary religious and mystical experiences, denigrating what is reported as spiritual or supernatural into categories of the natural and, even more severely, into the illusionary or the pathological.

Incomplete Constructivism

The second model, incomplete constructivism, is more nuanced in the balance that it maintains, or the admixture that it allows, between the components affecting the shape of a mystical experience. Incomplete constructivism argues, according to Forman, that the shape of an experience is provided by pre-existent circumstances, thus it is in large part culturally constructed, but other parts of the experience are provided by "something else."[24] Forman is not clear as to what this "something else" entails, as he simply states, somewhat vaguely (if not dismissively), that this "something else" can include "sensory input or whatever."[25]

In reality, it is not difficult to see the voice of William James here with his mysterious something "more," as an enigmatic dimension of such extraordinary experiences. Forman hints at such an interpretation, that the "something else" of incomplete constructivism is a reference to

[23] As quoted in Forman, ibid., 13. For Gimello's text see Robert Gimello, "Mysticism in its Contexts," in Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, 85.
[24] Ibid., Forman, 13.
[25] Ibid., 13.

a deeper (perhaps even transcendent) element of the experience, with his following point. Forman maintains that incomplete constructivism, although seemingly plausible on the surface, "cannot do the work required by the pluralism thesis."[26] The pluralism thesis, which argued that mystical experiences are different throughout cultures, is most easily undermined, according to Forman, through an incomplete constructivist hermeneutic when the role of pre-existent beliefs in constructing a mystical experience are minimal; "for if so, then the experiences from different cultures would be distinguishable in only minimal ways."[27] He explains that under such a circumstance the perennialist might say "that mysticism is largely the same but for the 'different flavors' that accrue to those experiences as a result of the constructivist activities of the subject."[28] In other words: "If there are only different flavors to a common experience type, then the perennialists can base their arguments on the underlying parallelism; Katz's plea for the recognition of differences would go unheard. Thus—and this is key—the best way (perhaps the only way) to protect the pluralist hypothesis is through a complete constructivism."[29]

The problem, therefore, is that an incomplete constructivism, in seeing an admixture of mediated and unmediated components in content that shape a mystical experience, does not challenge the fact that the unmediated components, the "something else," can be universally the same at their core throughout cultures. For if they are the same then the perennialist interpretation of a cross-culturally, universally present, shared mystical experience with mutual characteristics overrides the constructivist notion of a pluralism thesis.

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[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 13-14.

Catalytic Constructivism

A third possible model of constructivism, what Forman calls "catalytic constructivism," maintains that the original "generating problems"[30] or "starting problems of each doctrinal, theological system,"[31] consciously shape the experience that an individual will encounter (or, more aptly, in this view, *construct*). Katz articulates the idea eloquently, explaining: "The respective 'generating' problems at the heart of each tradition suggest their respective generating answers involving, as they do, differing mental and epistemological constructs, ontological commitments, and metaphysical superstructures which order experience in differing ways."[32] Therefore, to illustrate the point with an example, let us consider Christianity.

Since the "starting problem" of Christianity constitutes Original Sin and humanity's separation from God, the Christian mind will be affected by this conceptual paradigm and generate an experience that solves the problem of this paradigm, being shaped by the same conceptual (thus, theological or doctrinal) framework. This is why, Katz would argue, Christians who experience extraordinary religious experiences generate or construct experiences of *mystical union* (instead of, say, experiences of *nirvana*, as Buddhists do, or *devekuth*, as Jews do): because the "union" of the human and divine in such an experience counters the separation between God and humanity that transpired during the "generating problem" of the Christian tradition: the problem of Original Sin. Therefore, Katz and like-minded thinkers argue that the original problems of faith traditions—conceptual, theological, doctrinal—play a role as catalysts generating specific content experiences. "We are each a unitary consciousness and each of us connects the 'problem' and its answer through forms of connection, synthesis, and objectivity

[30] Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, 14.
[31] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 62.
[32] Ibid.

which are integral to our consciousness as conscious agents of the sort we are."[33] In other words, the altered state of consciousness that the Buddhist generates as *nirvana* is different from the Christian's *mystical union* because the former mentally constructs an experience that provides an answer to a specific system of primordial beliefs which differ from the latter's, and vice-versa. The Buddhist is not concerned with Original Sin or humanity's separation from God (and, therefore, will not construct an experience of *mystical union*) but is concerned with suffering and impermanence (and will, therefore, generate an experience appropriate to this original dilemma).

What is most important in understanding this final variation of constructivism, catalytic constructivism, is that with this hermeneutic Katz and like-minded constructivists are *not saying* that the Christian encounters a genuine experience of *mystical union* because of the primordial problem of Original Sin and separation from God. On the contrary, what is being articulated is that the Christian *mentally constructs* an experience of *mystical union* because of the primordial problem of Original Sin and separation from God that is present in Christianity's belief system. This is an important distinction to recognize and to distinguish from the perennial views of someone like Evelyn Underhill, for example. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Underhill would argue that God communicates through extraordinary experiences by using the concepts and symbols that the particular culture would understand. Therefore, the Divine genuinely communicates through an experience of *mystical union* with the Christian, or through an experience of *nirvana* with the Buddhist, or through an experience of *devekuth* with the Jewish mystic, according to Underhill's perennialism, applying the conceptual framework in the divine communication that each particular tradition would comprehend. In each case, the experience comes from the same Source but is flavored with different forms of expression, contingent on

[33] Ibid.

cultural and religious understanding. This is different, an absolute inversion in fact, from what Katz is articulating. In his view, it is the Christian who constructs the experience of *mystical union*; it is the Buddhist who constructs the experience of *nirvana*; it is the Jew who constructs the experience of *devekuth*. These experiences are not genuine communications of the Divine but subjective constructions of the human mind based on complex processes of indoctrination and epistemological activity within the metaphysical framework of primordial systems of belief. "The mind can be seen to contribute both the problem and the means of overcoming: it defines the origin, the way, and the goal, shaping experience accordingly," Katz concludes.[34] In this view it is the mind, and not something Divine or transcendent, that formulates the origin of the experience.

Developments in the Debate:
The PCE and the New Perennialism

Forman has challenged Katz on this matter, accusing Katz and like-minded constructivists of a cultural reductionism in their analysis of mystical experiences.[35] Like Katz, Forman is an important scholar in the modern perennialist-constructivist debate, having led the counter-response to the constructivists in recent decades. The most influential work in articulating this response was the publication of *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, a collection of essays by neo-perennialist scholars responding to the (then dominant) constructivist paradigm toward understanding extraordinary religious and mystical experiences.[36] The work is edited by Forman who himself has contributed an essay alongside a lengthy introduction.[37]

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 52-54.
[36] See note 44 of the first chapter.
[37] Robert K.C. Forman, "Eckhart, *Gezucken*, and the Ground of the Soul," 98-120. Forman's introduction to the work frames the main issues underlying the modern constructivist and neo-perennialist debate; see Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 3-52, in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*.

The Problem of Pure Consciousness attempted to deconstruct the constructivist approach, while a subsequent publication by these neo-perennialists, *The Innate Capacity*, has attempted to formulate a new model under which to examine and understand mysticism.[38] This new model is labeled Pure Conscious Experience (PCE); it is a much more spiritual approach to mysticism than the sociologically-laden constructivist version. Proponents of the PCE model argue, similarly to traditional perennialist approaches, that individuals across cultures and time periods tend to report similar religious and mystical experiences notwithstanding the different religious backgrounds they stem from. The neo-perennialists have identified a core, similar experience present throughout cultures which a constructivist epistemology, according to them, cannot account for. The experience is known as the pure conscious experience (PCE), sometimes articulated as pure conscious awareness. Andrew Newberg describes this experience thus: "In a profound unitary state, there are no boundaries of discrete beings, there is no sense of the passage of time, no sense of the extension of space, and the self-other dichotomy is totally obliterated. In other words, the state consists of an absolute sense of unity without thought, without words, without sensation, and not even being sensed to inhere in a subject."[39] G. William Barnard similarly writes of the PCE as a state of mystical awareness which has been described by neo-perennialists "as simple, contentless awareness itself, a state of consciousness that is free from thoughts and that does not contain a subject/object distinction."[40] Neo-perennialists have used the PCE to challenge the epistemological assumptions of constructivism, arguing that the central tenets of constructivism, specifically the ideas that *every* mystical experience is mediated and conceptually shaped by pre-existent structures of thinking and indoctrination, does not hold up in

[38] See note 44 of the first chapter.
[39] Andrew B. Newberg, *Principles of Neurotheology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 189.
[40] G. William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 136.

light of the PCE. The PCE in this regard becomes the exception to the rule, pointing to limitations, in essence to the inapplicability, of constructivist epistemology toward explaining such experiences. Stephen Bernhardt explains the matter eloquently, considering how the characteristics of the PCE, as a content-less, unitive experience of consciousness transcend the epistemological assumptions of mediation and shaping, as present in constructivist hermeneutics:

> In other words, it is hard to see how one could say that the pure consciousness event is mediated, if by that it is meant that *during the event* the mystic is employing concepts; differentiating his awareness, according to religious patterns and symbols; drawing upon memory, apprehension, expectation, language or the accumulation of prior experience; or discriminating and integrating. Without the encounter with any object, intention, or thing, it just does not seem that there is sufficient complexity during the pure consciousness event to say that any such conceptually constructive elements are involved.[41]

The fact that the PCE has been reported cross-culturally, as a universally present experience in the Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist mystical traditions further fuels neo-perennialist attacks on constructivist ideas, undermining the pluralism thesis.[42] For, if each religious tradition's contextual structures of belief, thinking, and expectation are supposed to shape and, therefore, produce a different mystical experience, as the pluralism thesis postulates, then how can this explain the presence of identical, content-less, unitive experiences of consciousness as the PCE being present in diverse religious traditions?

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[41] Stephen Bernhardt, "Are Pure Conscious Events Unmediated," 232, in Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*.

[42] Forman explains that if a "mystic's 'set' provides his or her content, the different 'sets' from the various traditions should provide sharply different experiences. But, as is demonstrated in Part I [of *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*], there are experiences from many traditions and ages which are not sharply different. How could experiences with identical definitions (wakeful objectless consciousness) arise from such divergent sources if different contents are provided?" Part I, as Forman refers to the text, includes essays on pure consciousness and Indian Buddhism, Christian mysticism, and Jewish mysticism, pointing to the cross-cultural presence of the content-less and unitive pure consciousness experience in various religious traditions. See Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 24. Also in the same volume the following essays: Paul J. Griffiths, "Pure Consciousness and Indian Buddhism," 71-97; Forman, "Eckhart, *Gezucken,* and the Ground of the Soul," 98-120; Daniel C. Matt, "*Ayin*: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism," 99-121; all in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness.*

Furthermore, neo-perennialists have challenged the methodological reductions of many constructivist scholars. For example, one problem that Forman has with Katz is how the latter reduces the study of mysticism to textual analysis and, specifically, texts of certain mystics. Katz explains that "the only evidence we have…is the account given by mystics of their experience. These are the data for study and analysis. No scholar can get behind the autobiographical fragments to the putative 'pure experience'—whatever one holds that to be."[43] As well as claiming that we can *only* study mysticism through the remaining texts left over by mystics, thus providing the only source material, Katz admits that only a few subjects, "the great mystics," deserve our attention.[44] Comparing these constructivists to the perennial thinkers, John Horgan astutely observed: "Unlike [Huston] Smith, Aldous Huxley, and other perennialists, these academic scholars [constructivists] treated mysticism not as a universal human experience but as a literary phenomenon, a collection of 'texts' requiring interpretation in the light of other texts."[45]

Forman's own position argues for a more personal, and contemporary, approach. Forman especially thinks it would be useful to conduct interviews with practitioners of numerous spiritualities to compare and contrast their inner experiences, instead of limiting scholars of religious experience to textual analysis of the past.[46]

In addition to observing Katz's claims, Forman also notes the provocative postulations of constructivist scholar Robert Gimello, who writes: "All mystical experiences, like all

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[43] As quoted in Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 17. Original quotation from Steven T. Katz, "The 'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 5, in Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*.
[44] Ibid. Forman, 18.
[45] John Horgan, *Rational Mysticism: Dispatches from the Border between Science and Spirituality* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 36.
[46] Forman's work, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, applies the very technique. See pages 21-30 for Forman's conducted interviews with practitioners of different spiritualities.

experiences generally, have specific structures, and these are neither fortuitous nor *sui generis*. Rather they are given to the experiences, at their very inceptions, by concepts, beliefs, values, and expectations *already operative* in the mystics' minds."[47] The problem that Forman has with these constructivist approaches is that, through the constructivist framework, mysticism "becomes a kind of delusion fostered by the indoctrination system. But it thereby loses its authenticity."[48]To better understand this argument it deserves recognition that Forman, and like-minded neo-perennialists, do not necessarily disagree that cultural context is involved in mystical experience, they simply disagree on its time and function. To demonstrate this, let us take an example outside a Christian framework.

Katz argues that setting a "Buddhist understanding of the nature of things over against the Jewish should, in itself, already be strong evidence for the thesis that what the Buddhist experiences as *nirvana* is different from what the Jew experiences as *devekuth.*"[49] However, Forman counters that such logic is fallacious for it "implicitly denies the possibility that there may be two terms with different senses which have the same referent."[50]In other words, what Forman is saying, in promulgating a cross-cultural perspective again, is that the experience which the Buddhist calls *nirvana*, a very mystical state, can be the *same experience* that the Jew calls *devekuth* or, further, it can be the *same experience* that the Christian calls *mystical union*. However, each understands the experience differently due to the pre-existent, conceptual framework that each is operating from. The cultural context in itself does not make the individual

[47] Quoted in Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 52; Gimello's original essay found in Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*.
[48] Forman, 52.
[49] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 38.
[50] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 47.

experiences different but simply gives *the same experience* different *forms* of interpretation and expression, according to neo-perennialist phenomenology.

Here we see that Forman, a post-constructivist, is not abandoning concepts or language that is idiosyncratic to each religious tradition but, unlike the constructivists, he is positioning the application of cultural context, and all its conceptual attributions, *after* the experience. Thus the claim is being made that the mystical experience, for it to be a genuine spiritual event, must come first and *thereafter* the mystic applies his or her cultural concepts and understanding to that experience. Another possibility would be "incomplete constructivism," wherein the content is shaped by both pre-existent ideas and the "something more," thus having the combination of the mediated and the unmediated. The presence of the unmediated components in the content—thus, the *pure*, or *given*, experience—even if existing alongside mediated components, assures the integrity of the experience. Otherwise, as Forman noted, mysticism becomes a type of delusion fostered by the indoctrination system, a view that complete constructivism would promulgate; a view that challenges the very integrity of experience.

A major issue behind the debates between constructivists and neo-perennialists is the question of epistemology. Here the influence of Immanuel Kant's ideas have been central in formulating modern hermeneutics of understanding religious and mystical experiences. However, the validity of Kantian epistemology in this specific discourse has been put into question, notwithstanding the fact that it is the predominant epistemological model underlying the debate. Let us, therefore, turn to this issue.

The Epistemological Question:
A Kantian Hermeneutic or a "Kantian" Misreading of Kant?

Anthony Perovich, Jr. explains that the "fundamental tenet of Kant's epistemology is that the knower plays an active role in the production of experience. . . . On this view, no experiences

are simply given, but rather are always mediated through the organizing structures that knowers bring with them."[51] Thus, all human experiences are mediated by the pre-existent structures, external and internal, affecting the mind and, therefore, there is no such thing as an unmediated experience, according to Kant's epistemology. This is important to realize because Kant's epistemology plays a central role in formulating the basis for a constructivist understanding of religious and mystical experiences, and constitutes the underlying framework of cognition responsible for fueling the debate between perennialists and constructivists. In the previous chapter, G. William Barnard was noted as pointing out that "so many of the contemporary understandings of the dynamics of mystical experience are, on the face of it at least, indebted to Kant. . . ."[52] This is as a result of Kant's epistemological influence.

Steven Katz, Peter Moore, Robert Gimello, H.P. Owen, John E. Smith and a number of other constructivist scholars have used Kant's epistemological framework as a hermeneutic to advance a constructivist interpretation and understanding of mystical experiences.[53] Speaking of the Kantian influence on modern constructivists, Forman notes that "[Steven] Katz and his colleagues are fond of the Kantian term 'mediation,' and seem to regard his doctrines as the logical foundation of their own."[54] Kant's epistemology has had a widespread influence throughout academia, affecting disciplines throughout the humanities and social sciences.

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[51] Anthony N. Perovich, Jr., "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?", 238, in Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness.*
[52] Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 116,
[53] See the essays by Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 22-74; Peter Moore, "Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique," 101-131; Robert Gimello, "Mysticism and Meditation," 170-199 in Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. See also Steven T. Katz, "The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience," 3-60; Robert M. Gimello, "Mysticism in Its Contexts," 61-88; H.P. Owen, "Experience and Dogma in the English Mystics," 148-162; John E. Smith, "William James's Account of Mysticism: A Critical Appraisal," 247-279; all in Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions.*
[54] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 56.

In a noted essay titled "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?" Anthony Perovich, Jr. has presented the most persuasive critique of the way that constructivist scholars have used Kant's epistemology to interpret mystical experiences. Perovich uses Kant himself to show how "Kantian"[55] (or "neo-Kantian") constructivists have misunderstood and misapplied Kant's epistemological model with regard to mystical experiences. He argues that the philosophical foundation on which the constructivist hermeneutic rests does not provide the grounds to critique extraordinary religious or mystical experiences the way that constructivists have been doing, perceiving a misapplication of Kant's ideas in their approach.[56] Let us consider the reasoning behind Perovich's thesis in detail.

Perovich explains how the pluralism thesis, as promulgated by constructivists to deny a shared universal core between mystical experiences, is based on Kant's epistemology.

> The method of attack [against the perennial idea of universality] consists in declaring one's allegiance to the Kantian epistemology…affirming that the intellectual and practical context of each religious tradition performs the function of Kant's categories in shaping the religious experience of the adherents of that tradition and pointing out that these claims are incompatible with the view that the experience of mystics from different traditions can be phenomenologically identical.[57]

This constructivist argument, that religious experiences are the products of a culturally conditioned and pre-existent framework of thinking leading to different experiences among different cultures, is, when promulgated, "often conjoined with an account of the reports by mystics from one or more traditions, along with the suggestion that the clearly tradition-specific

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[55] Perovich explains: "In this essay I seek to distinguish between ideas that are Kantian, that is, held by Kant himself, from those that are Kantian, that is, inspired by, or comparable to, views held by Kant though not, in fact, actually adhered to by him." The attributions "Kantian" and "neo-Kantian" are often used interchangeably to refer to the latter definition. Another term similarly used to refer to ideas that go beyond Kant himself, though they are inspired by his thought, is "hyper-Kantianism," introduced by William Forgie. See Perovich, "Philosophy of Mysticism," 251, n. 10; and William Forgie, "Hyper-Kantianism in Recent Discussions of Mystical Experience," *Religious Studies* 21 (1985), 205-218.
[56] Perovich, "Philosophy of Mysticism," 237-253.
[57] Ibid., 239-240.

character of these reports offers empirical evidence in support of the conclusions already deduced on philosophical grounds."[58] Here Perovich is deconstructing the constructivist approach by noting that an adherence to Kant's epistemological framework can set up predetermined conclusions on the basis of a pre-established philosophical structure. It is true that there is an empirical base in the scholarship of constructivists, particularly through textual analysis of mystical writings in documenting obvious differences between mystics of various traditions. However, the notion that there may be various terms with different senses in such writings which refer to the same experience is inherently rejected in favor of the epistemological presuppositions of Kantian thinking. This is what Perovich and other perennialists are pointing to.[59] Perovich articulates three main points that form his thesis. He writes that:

1) the Kantian epistemology seems singularly inapposite when applied to certain sorts of mystical experience;

2) that, ironically, Kant was himself no "Kantian" in this area; and

3) that Kant's own position reveals the mistake on which the "Kantian" philosophy of mysticism rests and helps us to orient ourselves toward more promising paths in this area of study.[60]

Let us consider the strength or weakness behind each point, starting with the first.

When writing of "certain sorts of mystical experience" that are not conducive to Kantian epistemology, not fitting into the analytical framework of the hermeneutic (or, one can say, being impervious to its filtering lens), Perovich is primarily referring to the PCE; although he articulates the experience using classical ideas through the invocation of Neoplatonic tradition,

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[58] Ibid., 240.

[59] For example, Forman, as referenced earlier, challenging Katz's idea that the Buddhist experience of *nirvana* is different from what the Jew experiences as *devekuth*, argues that such logic is fallacious for it "implicitly denies the possibility that there may be two terms with different senses which have the same referent." Forman identifies Katz as a "neo-Kantian" thinker earlier in the text, associating Katz's epistemological paradigm with Kant's philosophy. See Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 34, 47.

[60] Perovich, "Philosophy of Mysticism," 240.

using Plotinus to provide such a mystical experience. Perovich emphasizes "the description left by Plotinus of the One with which the mystic unites: it is formless and precedent to all being, not in space or time, without multiplicity."[61] Such a Neoplatonic understanding of mystical experience, which aligns with the PCE experience as being formless, "cannot be represented as a product of formal, conceptual shaping," according to Perovich.[62] In order to understand why this is the case, we need to consider the ways that content and form play a role in influencing mystical experiences.

In philosophical understanding one of two things can happen in the interaction between content and form, Perovich explains. First (and this is how Kant understands it), we have a manifold intuition (this is the content) that is shaped by filtering categories that bring an objective unity (the form) to the manifold and, thus, provide the forms for its synthesis; "this is one way in which the conceptual context may intelligibly shape experience."[63] Another way is the inversion, wherein we begin with an undivided whole in content (not a manifold), which is "sliced up"; the "task of concepts [the forms], then, is not to unify, but to cut up this continuum."[64] In either case, however—whether the manifold intuition (as content) is shaped into a unified whole, or whether a unified whole (as content) is shaped into sliced elements—neither of these operating frameworks make sense when considering the type of mystical experience that Plotinus invoked, or that neo-perennialists invoke with the PCE. Perovrich explains:

> To understand "shaping" in terms of imposing a conceptual form on a given content does not transform that content except to add connections or divisions that are not present in the content itself: the manifold may be synthesized, but the result is still a synthesized *manifold*; the "spread and flow of existence" may have its continuity interrupted by

[61] Ibid., 241-242.
[62] Ibid., 242.
[63] Ibid., 241.
[64] Ibid.

> conceptual slicings, but such interruptions *introduce* difference, multiplicity, and form rather than do away with them. It is implausible to regard the Neoplatonic experience of the One, formless and without multiplicity, as the result of slicing a whole or unifying a manifold. Hence, there are some mystical experiences, at least, for which the claim that the mystic's conceptual scheme shapes his or her experience—if understood formally—is implausible.[65]

This conclusion is understood if the hermeneutic of constructivism which interprets the mystical experience is an *incomplete constructivism*, that is, one wherein the content of the experience is understood as being shaped by the form. However, if dealing with a hermeneutic of *complete constructivism*, wherein both content and form are recognized as shaping the experience, then additional problems arise, according to Perovich, in light of Kantian epistemology.

Although Perovich does not himself use the terms "incomplete constructivism" and "complete constructivism" (these are terms applied by Forman) he speaks to their meaning by noting the various problems that arise from the ways that such lenses of interpretation are applied. In the aforementioned example, Perovich was essentially pointing to the dilemma of an "incomplete constructivism" which cannot account for a formless mystical experience. Regarding "complete constructivism," Perovich articulates a newly present dilemma, or challenge, enunciating: "The attempt to locate the conceptual contribution of the tradition in the content rather than the form represents the suicide of the Kantian epistemological model. . . ."[66] Perovich makes a sophisticated argument here, explaining:

> To whatever extent the intellectual structure of the religious tradition is depicted as the source of experiential content, to that degree the notion of an independent "given" that requires shaping and structuring (in different ways by different conceptual frameworks) is rendered vacuous. Once the "given" evaporates from one's account, a Kantian theory of knowledge is no longer appropriate: if there is nothing to be mediated, then there is no point in insisting on the mediated character of all experience. One does not require the intricacies of Kantian epistemology (or even "Kantian" epistemology) to represent mystical experience as fabrication.[67]

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[65] Ibid., 242.
[66] Ibid., 242-243.
[67] Ibid., 243.

The main idea here is clear. The central component of Kantian epistemology is *mediation*: pure experience is mediated through conceptual structures which filter and give shape to that experience; therefore, in the form of expression there is no such thing as an unmediated experience. However, the implication is that the original experience (the content), before it was subjected to the mediation of conceptual structures, was a pure and "given" experience. Complete constructivism, on the other hand, argues that the source of experiential content is already shaped by pre-existent factors. Therefore, a pure, unmediated "given" is fully eliminated from the picture. In this regard, Perovich is not wrong in using the forceful language of "fabrication" when describing the way that complete constructivism understands mystical experiences because the implication is that there was never anything pure *to be mediated* but that the very beginning constitutes a fabrication or, at best, a distortion. When the core is *not mediation* but fabrication then the epistemological framework is far from Kantian. Perovich adds that beyond these dubious usages of Kantian epistemology, the constructivist position has little to fall back on other than "unexplicated metaphors of shaping," postulating that this "is enough to suggest that there is something fundamentally misguided with the employment of 'Kantian' ideas in this sphere."[68]

The second main point of Perovich's thesis is to show that Kant himself was no "Kantian" in regard to mysticism, meaning that in interpreting mystical experiences Kant would not use the hermeneutic that constructivists have applied on the basis of his epistemology toward mystical experiences. Kant's own perspective toward mysticism was more apophatic, Perovich argues, believing that the mysteries of mystical knowledge transcend human comprehension, human cognition. However, this does not mean that Kant believed in the experiences of the

[68] Ibid., 243.

mystics. Perovich explains that Kant was very distrustful of the claims of mystics, believing them to be false, not because God and the spiritual mysteries that mystics report to reveal are not true but because Kant believed that human beings do not possess the cognitive faculty to comprehend such mysteries in this life. "He insists that the claims of the mystics are false, that mystical 'inner illuminations' are merely 'pretended,' because mystical cognition presupposes a faculty which we in fact lack."[69] Thus, to quote Kant, "this feeling of the immediate presence of the Supreme Being…would constitute a receptivity for an intuition for which there is no sensory provision in man's nature."[70]

Here it is interesting to contrast Kant's epistemological perspective with that of William James. As noted in the previous chapter, James was challenging a rationalistic skepticism about mystical experiences whose underpinnings were based on Kant's epistemology. James believed in a faculty in human beings that transcends the senses and is able to comprehend deeper, spiritual mysteries. This was, of course, the "mystical consciousness" for James. Kant, on the other hand, reduced all knowledge to sense perception. Since the mystical consciousness, as James understands it, transcends the human senses, then it is impossible, in Kant's framework, to use this hermeneutic as a means to gain knowledge: as nothing beyond sense perception is capable of cognitive comprehension, according to Kant.

But Perovich makes an extremely important distinction that cannot be overlooked. While Kant denies the experiences that the mystics report, believing that human beings do not have the cognitive faculty to comprehend such mysteries, he does not deny the possibility of such content that the mystics report. Perovich explains that Kant "is not utterly opposed to faculties of

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[69] Ibid., 243.

[70] As quoted in Perovich, ibid., 244; taken from Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. with an introduction and notes by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, with an essay by John R. Silber (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 163.

mystical intuition, only to claims that we can employ them in the present life. He holds that after death we might know in just the way the mystics describe is possible, but we can have no certainty in the matter."[71] Therefore, what Kant takes issue with is the mystics' claim to such transcendent knowledge as their experiences report, but not to the possibility of such knowledge being true, a realization that can only be known in the afterlife, according to Kant. Perovich explains how Kant's understanding of mystical experiences set him apart from the "Kantians" who have applied his epistemological framework to form a constructivist hermeneutic:

> We are able, therefore, to distinguish Kant's view from that of the "Kantians." According to Kant, mystical knowledge is to be distinguished from ordinary empirical knowledge not only by its object, but also by its epistemological structure: mystical knowledge consists in a communion with God and a sharing in divine self-knowledge of His Ideas. Such intellectual intuition may be possible for us in the future, but it demands a cognitive faculty different from those employed in empirical knowledge and so, Kant believes, is not available in this life. The "Kantians," on the other hand, make no distinction between the conditions of mystical cognition and the conditions of ordinary cognition. In doing so, they not only depart from Kant's own view but also, I believe, err in doing so.[72]

Thus Perovich's second main point to his thesis, that Kant was no "Kantian" when it comes to mystical interpretation, is clear. The reason why this is the case is present in Perovich's third main point: that Kant's own position reveals the mistake on which the "Kantian" philosophy of mysticism rests; the mistake is in the application of the epistemological model toward mystical experiences, something that Kant himself would not do.

In other words, Kantians (or neo-Kantians) apply Kant's epistemological model, which the latter intended to interpret ordinary experiences, to try to comprehend mystical experiences, misapplying the hermeneutic as the model was meant solely for ordinary, and not mystical, cognition. Kant would argue, according to Perovich, that his epistemological framework cannot be applied to understanding mystical intuition because such intuition transcends the capacity of

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[71] Perovich, "Philosophy of Mysticism," 244.
[72] Ibid.

any human faculty of comprehension that this life offers: that includes, of course, transcending the capacity of comprehension that a Kantian epistemology affords the intellect.

Perovich notes that many perennialists are criticized by constructivists as roughly forcing mystical texts "to conform to preestablished ideas of experiential uniformity" but, adding his own challenge to the constructivist hermeneutic, Perovich explains that "neither must one force them [mystical texts] to conform to preestablished ideas of epistemological uniformity."[73] According to Perovich "no *presuppositions* about the mediated, shaped, conceptualized character of 'human experience'," which is what the Kantian epistemological hermeneutic is meant to analyze, are relevant to "the sorts of 'nonhuman experience' being reported" in mystical experiences by mystics.[74] As a solution to the apparent misapplication, and consequent misunderstanding, that Kantian constructivists have conveyed through their epistemological usage of a fallacious hermeneutic (according to Perovich) in interpreting mystical experiences, Perovich proposes better epistemological understanding as a path for clarity in this area. He writes of the need for a "mystical epistemology"[75] which can lead to a more appropriate hermeneutical understanding of mystical experiences, since

> it seems to me the recent "Kantian" philosophy of mysticism rests on a mistake, the mistake of assuming that mystical experience is narrowly "human" experience and, so, is subject to the same treatment as is "human" experience generally. But the mystics insist that their experiences result from ecstasy, that their knowledge is gained as the result of employing faculties which are not ordinary "human" ones. At the very least, these claims translate as denials of the validity of "Kantian" epistemology in the mystical sphere. By studying their reports, we can also hope to learn something about the sort of epistemology that *is* appropriate here, given that we have once learned to avoid the pitfalls of a "Kantian" analysis of mystical experience. This last lesson—of course, the point is not without irony—could have been easily learned from Kant himself.[76]

[73] Ibid., 248.
[74] Ibid., 247, italics in original.
[75] Ibid., 249.
[76] Ibid., 250.

There are many strong points in Perovich's thesis, and it is clear that he makes a persuasive argument for it. However, it is not an argument without flaws, for shortcomings are also present. Perhaps the strongest shortcoming is alluded to in Perovich's final sentence, highlighting that the lesson of epistemological fallacy could have been learned from Kant himself. However true this is as a critique of "Kantian" constructivist epistemologies, the argument can also be turned upside-down and be used inversely against Perovich's thesis. Let us briefly explore this option.

If we look to Kant himself as a model and consider his personal convictions then it is not difficult to argue that Kant's own perspective in this debate may be closer to *complete constructivism* than to perennialism. It is true, and not unfair to deduce (given the evidence), that Kant would consider his epistemological framework as inadequate in getting to the root of mystical truths, as he perceived such truths to be beyond the comprehension of any human faculty of perception. However, Kant considered the experiences of the mystics to be *false* for the very reason that no human faculty, in this life, could grasp and make claims to transcendent truths the way that the mystics do, he believed. Therefore, if the experiences of the mystics according to Kant are false and, thus, *human*, then Kant would argue that they are completely constructed and, as a result, conducive to study and examination through his epistemological framework.

This is not to say that Perovich's thesis is false. It is simply saying that if Perovich is going to use Kant's own personal example as support for his thesis then he needs to consider how that personal example can, in fact, work to disprove the very argument that Perovich hopes to advance: the inapplicability of Kantian epistemology to mystics and their experiences. To consider the veracity of Perovich's thesis one needs to perceive Kant's example selectively,

choosing where to agree and where to disagree with the German philosopher. At first, it appears that Perovich's thesis only works if a paradox is present: if Kant is *right* in saying that mystical truths cannot be grasped by human faculties, therefore excluding his epistemological model from interpreting such truths; and, on the other hand, if Kant is *wrong* in saying that mystical truths cannot be grasped by human faculties, therefore allowing the mystics to grasp such higher truths through their experiences.

Of course, in this scenario one argument contradicts the other and presents a paradox that seems irreconcilable, showing a self-defeating contradiction in Perovich's thesis. However, there is a way to reconcile the paradox, and it is this way that Perovich upholds his thesis as viable. The paradox is reconciled if we consider that Kant is right in saying that mystical truths cannot be grasped by human faculties, therefore excluding the usage of his epistemological model, while, at the same time, if we consider that the experiences of mystics do not qualify under this epistemological criterion that restricts the attainment of mystical truths to the human faculties. For a mystical experience to be genuine at the heart of such an experience there must be the intrusion of grace into the natural world. Therefore, in this regard, it is not the human faculties but something other, something "more," such as divine intervention, which can make the grasp of mystical truths attainable in extraordinary experiences through a faculty of perception that transcends human senses.

This is ultimately what Perovich is saying in articulating that mystics report to receive their experiences through spiritual ecstasy and, therefore, "their knowledge is gained as the result of employing faculties which are not ordinary 'human' ones."[77] As a result, to advance his thesis, Perovich must use Kant selectively, agreeing with certain Kantian tenets while disagreeing with

[77] Ibid., 250.

others. Thus, Perovich agrees with Kant in enunciating that Kantian epistemology is inadequate in interpreting mystical experiences; however, he disagrees with Kant in the belief that the experiences of mystics must be false. How can Perovich reconcile the paradox of acknowledging that our human faculties are inadequate in perceiving mystical truths while allowing that the mystics did, in fact, perceive mystical truths? He can only do this by stepping outside the realm of philosophy, meaning the realm of reason, and entering into the realm of theology or spirituality, meaning the realm of revelation.

The logic of the thesis, therefore, could be understood thus: the mystic reports that his or her experience is *supernatural*, and *that is why it works*, because it is not subjected to the same measures of perception as natural experiences. Therefore, in the case of the mystics, it is not their natural human faculties that allow the perception of mystical truths but (in Christian terminology) it is supernatural grace that affords the experience, or (in more ecumenical, Jamesian language) it is the mysterious something "more" that allows higher perception. By themselves human faculties cannot perceive such immediate higher truths, without mediation, that is. But here, in the case of mystical experiences, such higher epistemological grasp is possible because the faculties are not acting on their own accord but through grace, which expands the windows of perception. Kant was studying religion "within the limits of reason," and there is much to gain from such a study. However, for Perovich's thesis to make sense religion cannot be limited to reason but must, in essence, transcend those epistemological boundaries and enter into the realm of revelation, opening the doors to a "mystical epistemology."

The Bigger Picture

Within the perennialist-constructivist debate it is important to recognize that there is a "bigger picture" that is in play, and it is vital to understand the implications behind this bigger

picture. In debating the matters of extraordinary religious and mystical experiences both neo-perennialists and constructivists are not simply partaking in discourses whose ultimate purpose is to defend or critique the integrity of such experiences, or simply have a debate that affects religious studies; there is more to it than that. Their debate is one whose consequences affect not only questions about religion but, moreover, about *institutional frameworks of thinking* that have influenced and permeated academia and thus the world of intellectual culture. Let us consider this.

Ann Taves explains that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many religious scholars advanced the idea that religious experiences exist in a category or class of their own, as something unique or *sui generis*, which cannot be explained through psychological, sociological, or biological terms.[78] "Sui generis" is a Latin phrase referring to an object or person that is unique, or in a class of their own, literally meaning "of its own kind."[79] The idea, of course, is that religious and mystical experiences are special subjects whose depths cannot be fully comprehended by the social or natural sciences. Within this framework of thinking another point is made, an apprehension of sorts: the fear that sciences like psychology, sociology, or biology may "reduce" religious experiences to something else if an attempt is made to apply these disciplines to study such extraordinary experiences. In other words, what is being criticized, and avoided, is an *epistemology of reductionism* that denigrates extraordinary religious experiences into natural or pathological categories, stripping them of their integrity.[80]

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[78] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 3.
[79] Ibid., 3, n. 1.
[80] Ibid., 3. See also Eric Leigh Schmidt, "The Making of 'Mysticism' in the Anglo-American World: From Henry Coventry to William James," *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Julia A. Lamm (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 452.

The *sui generis* approach toward religious experiences has been largely promulgated by classic perennialist thinkers, significantly affecting religious studies in the West. Wayne Proudfoot traces the influence of this model of thinking to the German philosopher of religion Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), particularly to Schleiermacher's 1799 work *On Religion: Speeches to the Cultured Among its Despisers.* Proudfoot explains that the "influence of this book has been enormous" and notes that, as a result of this work and a later publication (*The Christian Faith*), Schleiermacher has become recognized as "the seminal figure in nineteenth-century Protestant thought" by both critics and supporters.[81]

There were two goals to Schleiermacher's project, Proudfoot explains. The first: to present an accurate picture of true religion, or "the religious consciousness."[82] In this regard, Schleiermacher argued that both orthodox religionists (Christian and Jewish) and their Enlightenment critics have produced an erroneous representation of religion in depicting it (whether pro or con) in a moralistic manner as a system of beliefs and doctrines which must be, legalistically, adhered to in order to promote proper behavior.[83] Such an understanding abides by the Law but kills the Spirit, Schleiermacher claimed, arguing that the core of true religion is not found in moralism or doctrines but in the *experience* of the transcendent. Thus, with a mystical bent, Schleiermacher was promoting a unique experientialism that transcends the pursuit of knowledge and morality with a concentration on a deeper dimension of faith, enunciating that experience possesses an integrity of its own and is the basis of true religion.[84] It is not difficult to see how such a framework has influenced the thought of thinkers like James and Underhill.

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[81] Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 1.
[82] Ibid., 2.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.

The second goal of Schleiermacher's work is more theoretical and, according to Proudfoot, apologetic. "Schleiermacher hopes that by presenting religion in its original, characteristic form he will demonstrate the inapplicability of Enlightenment criticisms of religious belief, particularly of the Kantian critique of speculative metaphysics, to the actual phenomena of religion."[85] Here the implications are great, from Schleiermacher's perspective, as they postulate that extraordinary religious and mystical experiences transcend history and standard epistemology, thus transcending historical conditioning and criticism, existing not in another category of study which could be understood through anthropological, sociocultural, linguistic or historical methods but on a higher plane of meaning, being autonomous, unmediated, essential, and unique.[86] The implications of such a framework of thinking regarding extraordinary experiences affect not only academia but also dynamics of belief, devotion, and spiritual authority in various church and ecclesial traditions. In considering the "bigger picture," Taves explains how theologians used the purported uniqueness of religious experiences as a source of authority against skepticism and as a means to promote religious revival:

> This spilled over into theology and the emerging academic study of religion where thinkers with a liberal or modernist bent, mostly Protestant and a few Catholic, turned to the concept of religious experience as a source of theological authority at a time when claims based on other sources of authority—ecclesiastical, doctrinal, and biblical—were increasingly subject to historical critique. For modernist theologians who followed in the steps of the liberal Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, the self-authenticating experience of the individual seemed like a promising source of religious renewal, less vulnerable to the acids of historical critical methods.[87]

While such is the intellectual and religious context in which the works of James, Underhill, and other perennial thinkers of the early-twentieth century, like Rudolf Otto, Nathan Soderblom, and

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[85] Ibid., 2.
[86] Schmidt, "Making of 'Mysticism'," 452.
[87] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 3-4.

Friedrich Heiler,[88] flourished, the "tide began to shift," according to Leigh Eric Schmidt, in the late twentieth-century with the advent of constructivist scholarship.[89]

Schmidt locates the beginnings of the hermeneutical turning-point in the 1978 publication of Katz's *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, and emphasizes that "by 1983 Katz's colleague Hans H. Penner openly dismissed 'mysticism' as 'a false category,' an essentialist 'illusion'. . . . Penner, in effect, set perpetual quotation marks around the term to signal the emptiness of its *sui generis* pretensions to universality and transcendence."[90] From here religious and mystical experiences were to be subjected to "a radically historicist perspective" that did not consider such subjects to be universal, unique, or essential, but constantly changing and shifting, being the products of historical and social construction and not of an unreachable and unknowable transcendent sphere.[91]

This significant shift, however, was not limited to the study of religion or mysticism but constituted a larger, paradigmatic shift in academia, particularly within the humanities and social sciences, that transpired in the twentieth-century and is understood as the "linguistic turn."[92] Taves explains that in "the wake of the general linguistic turn within the humanities" the entire

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[88] Ibid., 4.
[89] Schmidt, "Making of 'Mysticism'," 452.
[90] Ibid., 452; also, for the original source, see Hans H. Penner, "The Mystical Illusion," 89, in Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions.*
[91] Schmidt, "Making of 'Mysticism'," 453.
[92] The "linguistic turn" is a prominent, postmodern movement of the twentieth century within academic and intellectual culture that reexamines epistemological assumptions in the humanities and social sciences. Scholars who have applied this postmodern critique argue that all knowledge is mediated and stress, therefore, the way that language shapes knowledge and the way that specific discourses shape social reality, undermining the perennial notion that there is a "pure" or unmediated way to know. The linguistic turn has had an effect on how historians, philosophers, theologians, anthropologists, and other academicians within the humanities and social sciences focus their scholarship. See Richard M. Rorty, ed., *The Lingusitic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1992) and Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2004). Taves explains that the linguistic turn has been more embraced in the humanities than the social sciences. See Taves, *Religious Experience Rexamined*, 5, n. 4.

approach of the *sui generis* model was called into question.[93] "Many scholars of religion, eager to deconstruct an essentialist understanding of religion and religious experience, abandoned the focus on religious experience and recast the study of religion in light of critical theories that emphasize the role of language in constituting social reality in the context of relationships of power and inequality."[94] Forman explains that this larger paradigmatic shift in academia is "the real reason perennialism came into disfavor…the underlying cause was the broad paradigm shift in the humanities and social sciences toward constructivism."[95]

The linguistic turn ultimately constitutes a constructivist framework of thinking, as its central tenets stress linguistic and cultural mediation instead of pure, unmediated experience, as necessary filters to understanding all experiences. "This notion has become so dominant that it has taken on the status of a self-evident truism," Forman explains.[96] Forman provides a quick overview of how the humanities and social sciences have been affected by this epistemological framework:

> The sociology of knowledge and anthropology have both detailed how a culture's worldview structures and controls perception and beliefs. Psychologists since Freud have argued that past experiences—especially those of childhood—control, shape, and determine adult emotions, behavior patterns, and perceptions. Constructivism may be viewed as the controlling model in linguistic analysis; in other words, that a person's language constrains, determines, and informs the judgments one makes about oneself and others. . . . Historians of culture, ideas, and religion all base their work explicitly on this model. Even the study of modern art and art criticism may be viewed as grappling with the implications of this constructivist picture.[97]

Here, therefore, lies the bigger picture: the fact that when contemporary perennial scholars, neo-perennialists, are debating the merits of constructivist hermeneutics in understanding

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[93] Taves, ibid., 5.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Forman, "Introduction," 4.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., 4-5.

extraordinary religious experiences they are not only challenging other religion scholars but an entire, institutional framework of thinking whose established precepts have, as Forman put it, reached the level of self-evident truisms throughout academia. In other words, an entire institutional framework of thought is on the line in the consequences behind the ongoing perennialist-constructivist debates, transcending implications that concern only religious studies or the understanding of religious experiences. Taves explains that in "arguing for the cross-cultural stability of certain types of experiences that they construed as mystical, the neo-perennialists bucked the dominant trend in the humanities."[98] Forman confirms: "This was the underlying conceptual paradigm at the heart of the complaint about perennialism. Insofar as it seemed to deny that the linguistic background played a role in the shaping and perception of the mystical experience (during, not after), perennialism seemed to deny this 'self-evident' truth" that constructivism, fueled by the general linguistic turn, proposed throughout academia.[99]

An Attributional Approach

In addition to the work of Katz and his fellow constructivists with their multi-volume publications on mysticism and interpretation, another influential book affecting the debate was published by the philosopher of religion Wayne Proudfoot in 1985. In *Religious Experience*, Proudfoot advances the thesis that purported extraordinary religious and mystical experiences exist *not* apart, as *sui generis*, from other disciplines of study but as historical categories of study within religious studies. Proudfoot charted the development of *sui generis* understandings of religious experiences "from Friedrich Schleiermacher forward as part of a larger 'protective strategy' designed to seal off a guarded domain for religious experience amid modernity – one in which religious feelings would be safe from reductionistic explanations and scientific

[98] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 88.
[99] Forman, "Introduction," 5.

incursions."[100] Thus an ideological component, accusing perennial thinkers of producing scholarship that is designed to produce "protective strategies"[101] to defend religious sensibilities, was promulgated in Proudfoot's work. Proudfoot applies a hermeneutic in his work that an initial *sui generis* framework would categorize as reductionist, portraying the kind of "medical materialism" that James was highly critical of in his Gifford Lectures. Not surprisingly, Proudfoot is very critical of James' approach to religious and mystical experience, particularly James' four characteristics of mysticism. Proudfoot's own approach to experience was not void of tenets of psychology, particularly social psychology, incorporating attribution theory to form his approach:

> According to Proudfoot, the noetic quality of a mystical experience is merely the cerebral judgment made by the mystic that a certain experience is not solely his or her subjective creation. This judgment that an experience is "religious" is not made because the experience possesses certain identifiable, directly felt, intrinsic religious qualities, but instead, an experience is understood to be religious because the person who has the experience superimposes a ready-made label of "religious" onto any unexplained shift in his or her physical or psychological equilibrium.[102]

Compare Proudfoot's approach with the hermeneutic of reductionism that James warned of nearly a century earlier. James explained:

> Medical materialism seems indeed a good appellation for the too simple-minded system of thought which we are considering. Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa [of Avila] as an [*sic*] hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as an [*sic*] hereditary degenerate.[103]

Regarding his hermeneutic of religious experience as being reductionist Proudfoot has not denied the fact but has, on the contrary, affirmed it. Proudfoot does, however, make a

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[100] Schmidt, "Making of 'Mysticism'," 452; Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, xix, 199-208.
[101] Ibid. Proudfoot writes of a major purpose for his project: "Some recent attempts to deny the appropriateness of explanation of religious phenomena are examined and shown to conceal protective strategies not unlike those of the tradition of Schleiermacher…." xix. For Proudfoot's section on "protective strategies," see 199-208.
[102] Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 103.
[103] James, *Varieties*, 20-21.

distinction between two types, or forms, of reductionism, "descriptive reductionism" and "explanatory reductionism," arguing that scholars should avoid the former but embrace the latter.[104] Proudfoot articulates *descriptive reductionism* as "the failure to identify an emotion, practice, or experience under the description by which the subject identifies it."[105] In other words, a researcher must be able to describe the experiences of subjects in a manner that the subjects would recognize, otherwise what the researcher is describing is "something other than what the subjects claimed they have experienced."[106] Proudfoot provides a couple examples of this, explaining:

> To describe the experience of a mystic by reference only to alpha waves, altered heart rate, and changes in bodily temperature is to misdescribe it. To characterize the experience of a Hindu mystic in terms drawn from Christian tradition is to misidentify it. In each of these instances, the subject's identifying experience has been reduced to something other than that experienced by the subject.[107]

Proudfoot, however, deems this to be different from *explanatory reductionism*, which he accepts and which "consists in offering an explanation of an experience in terms that are not those of the subject and that might not meet his approval."[108] Here it is not the phenomenological description of the experience that is given new terms of meaning (as in descriptive reductionism) but the *explanation* for the experience. Thus, the "explanandum is set in a new context, whether that be one of covering laws and initial conditions, narrative structure, or some other explanatory model. The terms of the explanation need not be familiar or acceptable to the subject."[109] Proudfoot recognizes that reductionism "has become a derogatory epithet in the history and philosophy of

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[104] Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, xix; for his discussion of descriptive and explanatory reductionism see 196-198; see also Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 89.
[105] Ibid., Proudfoot, 196.
[106] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 89.
[107] Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 196-197.
[108] Ibid., 197.
[109] Ibid.

religion"[110] but he believes that a major reason for this is that scholarship against reductionism tends to conflate descriptive and explanatory reduction. He argues, therefore, for the importance of distinguishing between the two hermeneutical subtypes in renewing appreciation for a viable reductionist framework of interpretation regarding religious experiences.[111]

Although Proudfoot makes a sharp distinction the question remains whether the distinction continues to be, if considering the root of the issue, superficial. *Superficial* at least to neo-perennialists and likeminded, *sui generis* thinkers who, in articulating the most common criticism of reductionism, argue that reductive hermeneutics attempt to *explain* away religious and mystical experiences.[112] In other words, what is being criticized as the central issue is explanatory reductionism, and not necessarily descriptive reductionism, even if the latter is often conflated with the former. Distinguishing the two, and advocating for one approach over the other, does not diminish the concerns that *sui generis* thinkers have over reductionism, which is most recognized for its alternative *explanations*. Proudfoot's distinction, in embracing explanatory reductionism and dismissing descriptive, is at best a call for honest scholarship (as descriptive reductionism boarders on distortion of its subject, posing dubious ethicality) but it is far from an alleviation of concerns that reductionist theories of religion have evoked in those who perceive integrity in extraordinary religious experiences.

Proudfoot's work has had a great influence on the scholarship of Ann Taves, who uses attribution theory to study why individuals attribute religious meaning to their experiences—experiences that Taves does not call "extraordinary" or "mystical," but "unique," thus postulating that such experiences may, in fact, be subject to naturalistic explanations, arguing

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[110] Ibid., 190.
[111] Ibid., 198.
[112] In the following section of this chapter, called "Religious Experience and Reductionism," the issue of explanatory reductionism is taken up in detail.

that it is often unintended and unusual experiences which receive the ascription "religious," or lead "people to make religious attributions."[113] Taves is critical of the *sui generis* model and, as a counterpoint, advocates for the "ascription model" as a hermeneutic better suited to grasp the subject. She distinguishes the two models thus: the *sui generis* model assumes implicitly or explicitly that there are uniquely religious or mystical experiences while the ascriptive model, on the contrary, claims that "religious or mystical or spiritual or sacred 'things' are created when religious significance is assigned to them."[114] Therefore, in the ascriptive model an experience is not inherently religious or mystical in its essence but is understood as "religious" or "mystical," and therefore subjectively created as "thus," by the subsequent ascription assigned to it. "One of the ways that ambiguity is maintained with respect to the two models is by referring to 'religious experience,' as if it were a distinctive thing, rather than using the more awkward, but clearly ascriptive, formulation, 'experiences deemed religious.'"[115]

At first, it is easy to see parallels here between perennialism (as *sui generis*) and constructivism (as ascription) but eventually Taves clarifies, and we'll look at those clarifications, of how her ascription model differs from traditional interpretations. The ascription model is an attribution formulation, meaning it is a hermeneutic that is grounded in attribution theory. Attribution theory, which refers to the study of the phenomenological process by which persons ascribe meaning to their experiences, came into prominence in the 1970s and '80s through social psychology. Since then, attribution theory has been adopted by other disciplines of study and has even influenced the creation of new subfields of study within social psychology,

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[113] See Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 100; see also 88-119 to get Taves' overview of her usage of attribution theory and analysis in the discourse between religious experience and representation.
[114] Ibid., 17.
[115] Ibid.

cognitive theory, and neuroscience, specifically giving birth to the subfields of social cognition and social neuroscience.[116]

Attribution theory was incorporated into the study of religion as early as 1975 through an influential article authored by Proudfoot and Phillip Shaver, and the subject was subsequently expanded and developed through the work of other religion and psychology scholars.[117] Proudfoot's *Religious Experience*, published ten years after his article, was also highly informed by attribution theory, to the point – according to Taves – that "both constructivists and neo-perennialists overidentified constructivism with attribution theory, in large part because Wayne Proudfoot was centrally identified with both."[118] Taves makes important distinctions between a constructivist hermeneutic and one that applies attribution theory to religious experiences. A major part of her project, in this regard, is to articulate the need "to abandon the constructivist axiom that beliefs and attitudes are always formative of, rather than consequent to, experience in any very strong sense, in favor of a model that takes 'bottom-up' or unconscious processing more seriously."[119] Interestingly, while Taves argues for a hermeneutic that abandons an absolute adherence to a constructivist phenomenology of experience in favor of "unconscious processing," the conclusions of her approach are more in line with constructivist, rather than perennialist, interpretation, even helping to support constructivist conclusions with greater viability than a traditional constructivist phenomenology would. Let us consider this.

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[116] Taves explains that in the early 1980s after psychologists "recognized that attribution theories provided a theoretical bridge between cognitive theory and social psychology" the subfield of social cognition was formed (90). Subsequently, attribution theory was advanced by European social psychologists with the identification of various layers, or levels, through which attributions are made, incorporating both cognitive and societal aspects; and, in recent years, neuroscience has come into the picture as "psychologists linked the subfield of social cognition with the neurosciences to form the subfield of social neuroscience." See ibid., 90-91.
[117] See Wayne Proudfoot and Phillip Shaver, "Attribution Theory and the Psychology of Religion," in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1975, 14 (4): 317-30.
[118] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 92.
[119] Ibid., 93.

A good way to illustrate Taves' method is to use the argument and personal testimony of G. William Barnard. Barnard, who has criticized perceived limitations in the constructivist hermeneutic, shared his own testimony in an academic publication (a book he authored on the mystical philosophy of William James) to display how a mystical experience which he – Barnard – experienced as a boy contradicts, and ultimately disproves, such an epistemological approach.[120] It is specifically "complete constructivism" that Barnard is criticizing, the belief that mystical experiences are fully constructed by a particular culture's pre-existent, interpretative framework.[121] Barnard shares an out-of-body experience that he had as a thirteen-year-old, an experience which, in his analysis, undermines the tenets that encapsulate complete constructivism:

> When I was thirteen years old, I was walking to school in Gainesville, Florida, and without any apparent reason, I became obsessed with the idea of what would happen to me after my death. Throughout that day I attempted to visualize myself as not existing. I simply could not comprehend that my self-awareness would not exist in some form or another after my death. I kept trying, without success, to envision a simple blank nothingness. Later, I was returning home from school, walking on the hot pavement next to a stand of pine trees less than a block from my home, still brooding about what it would be like to die. Suddenly, without warning, something shifted inside. I felt lifted outside of myself, as if I had been expanded beyond my previous sense of self. In that exhilarating, and yet deeply peaceful moment, I felt as if I had been shaken awake. In a single, 'timeless' gestalt, I had a direct and powerful experience that I was not just that young teenage boy, but rather, that I was a surging, ecstatic, boundless state of consciousness.[122]

Barnard goes on to argue that "an epistemology of mystical experience that is based on 'complete constructivism' does not adequately reflect the dynamics of this experience."[123] He explains that as "a child of thirteen" he had no words, or previous framework of understanding, with which to make sense of his experience, realizing that he "just knew that 'something'

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[120] Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 127-129.
[121] Ibid., 129.
[122] Ibid., 127-128.
[123] Ibid., 128.

profound had occurred"[124]—that "something profound," however, was not informed nor inspired by any theological, religious, or cultural content that was preexistent in Barnard's mindset in his youth. Barnard admits that the "little religious training I had been exposed to during my brief, and to me incredibly boring, Sundays in church did not help me in my subsequent attempts to come to grips with this mysterious and yet powerful event."[125] In fact, it was not until many years later, when in adulthood Barnard started "studying Eastern philosophical scriptures" and spending several years practicing meditative disciplines that he "was able to give this experience a viable interpretative structure," interpreting the experience under a framework that was *different* from the religious knowledge (no matter how limited) of his youth.[126] Thus, Barnard explains how a complete constructivist hermeneutic that attributes *pre-existent* cultural influence as the formative factor in triggering mystical experiences is fully inadequate in explaining his experience:

> My previously religious and cultural conceptual background was not sufficiently dense and nuanced enough to constitute completely this experience. Instead I first had an experience, without any real religious preparation, that possessed inherently "mystical" qualities; then *after* having this experience (because it was sufficiently puzzling), I began to search for an intellectual framework that could accurately reflect the content that was latent in that experience. Undeniably, at thirteen years of age, I was not a completely blank slate: I knew that experience had something to do with awareness (and I knew enough to remain quiet about this experience with my parents and even friends). But to claim, as complete constructivists would, that this highly rudimentary conceptual framework created that experience seems woefully inadequate.[127]

In examining Barnard's experience and his epistemological conclusions about the experience, Taves notes, in agreement, how inadequate the constructivist view that Barnard criticizes *is* in providing a viable explanation for the dynamics behind his experience. Taves

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[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid., 128-129.

articulates that there are "some experiences"—noticeable is her refusal to use Barnard's terminology of "mystical experiences"—which indeed cannot be explained by a "thoroughgoing constructivist view"[128] but need to be understood, on the other hand, through an attributional lens of interpretation. Taves writes:

> Barnard's previous [religious and cultural] views could not adequately explain the novelty of his experience, which suggests that a thoroughgoing constructivist view is not adequate. Although Barnard acknowledges that he was not "a completely blank slate" culturally, he is right to insist, especially in light of the cross-cultural similarity between experiences of this type, that culture cannot adequately account for the shape of his experience. Barnard is also right to insist, following William James, that puzzling, inexplicable experiences (which he and James both view as upwellings from the unconscious) may introduce novelty and precipitate radical changes in individual lives and belief systems.[129]

An attributional approach, however, can, according to Taves, provide a naturalistic interpretation for Barnard's experience because attribution theory considers both top-down (culture sensitive) and bottom-up (culture insensitive) processing in considering and analyzing particular experiences.[130] Taves explains that a constructivist hermeneutic operates mainly under the former – culturally sensitive – top-down approach while it is the latter – culturally insensitive – bottom-down approach that takes the idea of "unconscious processing" more seriously and affords, therefore, the possibility of natural explanations for unique experiences that do not need to be culturally conditioned.[131]

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[128] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 98.
[129] Ibid., 97-98.
[130] Ibid., 93.
[131] In this regard, Taves offers a note of criticism toward the way that Proudfoot's usage of attribution theory conveyed the erroneous impression that the attribution process must be a conscious one (this is a major reason as to why constructivism and attribution theory have been over-identified, according to Taves). Taves explains, however, that the process of attribution can be based on "intended behavior" or "unintended behavior" (101), in other words, conscious or unconscious factors. She notes that "Proudfoot's use of the conversion account of Stephen Bradley—a nineteenth-century American evangelical Protestant who experienced heart palpitations after a religious revival and attributed them to the Holy Spirit—to illustrate the attribution process heightened the constructivist slant of his theory by giving the impression that the attributional process is a conscious one" (93). See Taves, ibid. For his interpretative usage of Stephen Bradley's conversion account see Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 102-105, 193-195. Proudfoot takes Bradley's account from William James, who used it in his Gifford

Deconstructing Barnard's narrative of his experience, Taves argues that an interweaving structure of cultural ideas, physical symptoms, and the practice of visualization are present to shape the experience, though she admits that the cultural aspects are not as apparent as in other cases, hence the reason that a complete constructivist hermeneutic would not work in explaining the experience.[132] Taves articulates her attributional approach by dissecting Barnard's experience into five stages, deconstructing his encounter with a naturalistic phenomenology. Let us consider the five stages of her deconstruction.

The first important stage of the experience, Taves observes, is present in Barnard's thinking about what would happen to him after his death, and thus Barnard's attempt to visualize himself as not existing. Already in this rudimentary part of the experience Taves sees cultural influence—interestingly, not religious but secular. She explains that Barnard "spontaneously initiated a practice in which he tried to imagine a counterfactual situation [not existing after death] that accorded with a secular cultural script."[133] This led to the second stage of the experience, according to Taves, wherein a paradox was produced in his mind as Barnard continued to visualize himself not existing, "that is, asking self to imagine self not being able to imagine."[134] This mental paradox led to the third stage, Taves explains, wherein something inside of Barnard shifted and the seemingly out-of-body experience was triggered. To explain this unique phenomenon Taves poses a hypothesis, postulating that "the paradox [in thinking] triggered an altered state of consciousness in which self-other boundaries dissolved and perception of self-body relations were altered."[135] Since Barnard described the experience as "a

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Lectures (Lecture IX, James' lecture on conversion). For his usage of Bradley's account, see James, *Varieties*, 177-181.

[132] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 109.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Ibid.

[135] Ibid., 110.

surging, ecstatic boundless state of consciousness," Taves hypothesizes that, as the fourth stage of the experience, "alteration of self-body-other relations triggered feelings of ecstasy and exhilaration."[136] Finally, bringing all these factors together, Taves articulates her conclusion in considering the fifth and final stage of the experience, enunciating: "The novelty and intensity of the experience triggered a need for explanation. No satisfying explanations surfaced, so the experience was protected and preserved for further reflection. Later meditation practice and the reading of spiritual texts led to his describing the experience as mystical and attributing it to a higher power."[137] Taves explains that this phenomenology of attribution can also be schematized as an interaction between ideas (thoughts), visual practices, physiological symptoms, and feelings, articulating the schema of Barnard's experience thus:

1. *Thoughts led to a spontaneous visualization practice.*
2. *Practice generated a mental paradox.*
3. *Paradox resolved itself in the dissolution of self-other boundaries.*
4. *Dissolution of self-other boundaries triggered feelings of ecstasy and exhilaration.*
5. *The novelty and intensity of the experience required explanation.*[138]

Of course, the biggest leap that Taves makes—and she purposely uses the terminology of "hypothesis"[139] to specify the apparent ambiguity behind her theory—is going from phase 2 to phase 3, postulating that the act of *thinking* (even if turned into an effort at visualization) would trigger such a powerful and ecstatic, out-of-body experience of altered consciousness as Barnard experienced as a boy and later identified as "mystical." Taves supports her hypothesis with a

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[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid., 110, italics in original.
[139] Taves writes: "I am hypothesizing that the mental paradox involved in the visualization triggered the dissolution of self-other boundaries [the altered state of consciousness]…." ibid., 110.

reference to the recent work of neuroscientists[140] who have "identified the regions of the brain that govern the sense of embodiment" and "are now able to experimentally induce rudimentary out-of-body experiences."[141] However, notwithstanding these intriguing findings, Taves concedes that "there are as yet no studies that link practices [such as visualization or meditation] with the manipulation of those brain areas" which can induce rudimentary out-of-body experiences.[142]

Moreover, Taves admits that in contrast to such studies relatively little research has been done "on the role of practices (visualization, meditation, chanting, fasting, et cetera) in triggering unusual experiences," although, she explains that there is "considerable historical and anecdotal evidence to suggest that this is often the case."[143] Taves thus references the works of psychologists and anthropologists "who have focused attention on the effects of cultivating imagery" and "self-injurious behaviors, such as fasting, sleep deprivation, and flagellation…."[144] No matter how relevant such studies are between the cultivation of images and "injurious behavior," the connection to Barnard's experience (especially as evidence against his interpretation) remains rather superficial as Barnard did not report partaking in such "injurious behavior" like the spiritual practices that Taves references. His experience was spontaneous, not premeditated with intensive spiritual disciplines. Furthermore, when looking at some of the

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[140] She cites: S. Arzy, G.Thut, C. Mohr, C.M. Michael, and O. Blanke, "Neural Basis of Embodiment: Distinct Contributions of Temporoparietal Junction and Extrastriate Body Area," *The Journal of Neuroscience* 26 (31), 2006, 8074-81; Olaf Blanke, T. Landis, L. Spinelli, and M. Seeck, "Out-of-Body Experience and Autoscopy of Neurological Origin," *Brain: A Journal of Neurology* 127 (2), 2004, 243-58; Olaf Blanke and Christine Mohr, "Out-of-Body Experience, Heautoscopy, and Autoscopic Hallucination of Neurological Origin: Implications for Neurocognitive Mechanisms of Corporal Awareness and Self-Consciousness," *Brain Research Reviews* 50 (1), 2005, 184-99; Olaf Blanke, C. Mohr, C.M. Michel, A. Pascual-Leone, P. Brugger, M. Seeck, T. Landis, and G. Thut, "Linking Out-of-Body Experience and Self-Processing to Mental Own-Body Imagery at the Temporoparietal Junction," *Journal of Neuroscience* 25 (3), 2005, 550-57.
[141] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 111.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid., 110.
[144] Ibid.

sources that Taves references in regard to studies on the cultivation of images, it is evident that reference is being made here to the cultivation of visions.[145] Yet, again, in this regard making connection to Barnard's experience still constitutes a stretch of the imagination as Barnard did not report experiencing a vision of any object, but encountering an out-of-body experience: thus a phenomenologically different experience than visionary phenomena. One source which Taves lists to support her hypothesis includes a study performed on the cultivation of visions in shamanism, wherein individuals deliberately partake in intensive, pre-meditated practices to cultivate certain images or visions.[146] Again, this is a great contrast to Barnard's comparably spontaneous experience as a lukewarm, and for the most part religiously illiterate, thirteen-year-old boy. The other sources that Taves incorporates could perhaps make a stronger case for her argument, referencing the works of anthropologist Tanya M. Luhrmann[147] whose research focuses on trances and dissociative disorders, but again such phenomena are not the same as out-of-body experiences and may be more applicable to explaining away (or naturalizing) other alleged occurrences, such as demonic possession.[148]

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[145] Taves references, for example, an article which studies the role of visions in shamanism: Richard Noll Jr., "Mental Imagery Cultivation as a Cultural Phenomenon: The Role of Visions in Shamanism," in *Current Anthropology* , 16 (4), 1985, 443-61.

[146] Ibid.

[147] See Tanya M. Luhrmann, "Yearning for God: Trance as a Culturally Specific Practice and its Implications for Understanding Dissociative Disorders," *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation*. Special Issue: *Dissociation in Culture* 5 (2), 2004, 101-29; and Luhrmann, "The Art of Hearing God: Absorption, Dissociation, and Contemporary American Spirituality," *Spiritus* 5 (2), 2005, 133-57.

[148] Callahan explains that dissociative disorder has become a prominent pathological category with which many scholars reduce claims of demonic possession: "claims for the existence of demons and demonic possession are dismissed. Once it is known that an impaired or intoxicated or highly suggestible mind can create horrible hallucinations of persecuting voices or induce voluntary tics or spasms or create alternative identities in dissociated states, it is no longer necessary to see Satan or demons as the cause. Dissociated identity disorders, or what used to be called multiple personality disorders, can produce weird conditions in which different persona with different voices and behaviors are manifested within one individual." See Callahan, *Women Who Hear Voices*, 14-15.

Although Taves would not label herself as a constructivist or a neo-perennialist, reading her work it is evident that Taves' conclusions lean toward constructivism, at least in the sense that she is critical of the *sui generis* model and believes in natural, pre-existent factors that not only shape, but also trigger, unique experiences which are deemed as "religious" or "mystical" by those who undergo them. Using an attributional model, Taves would not even label such experiences as "religious" or "mystical" but solely consider why such ascriptions are given to unique experiences after they occur, posing the presupposition in her epistemological approach that, at their core, such experiences are not what they seem to their subjects. Evident traces of Proudfoot's explanatory reductionism are present throughout her approach.

Despite discernable limitations present in Taves' attributional approach, her ultimate project is to provide an empirical, if not purely natural, understanding of religious experiences by using comparative study with other disciplines that examine experience, and by formulating an attributional epistemology that can account for more explanatory accounts of such experiences than traditional interpretations. Taves argues that in so far as scholars in religious studies resist comparative work with other disciplines, considering the resistance to integration that the *sui generis* model has historically been responsible for, they inhibit a much needed interdisciplinary integration.[149] This is a major reason why Taves is a proponent of an ascription model and an opponent of a *sui generis* model, because of the major methodological implications present within each framework. Of primary concern to Taves is the resistance that the *sui generis* model has toward studying religious experiences in nonreligious terms, thus the resistance present therein toward incorporating nonreligious disciplines into the study of religion. "Stated positively, it [the *sui generis* model] asserted that religious things must be explained in religious

[149] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 118-119.

terms; negatively, it prohibited 'reducing' religion to something else by explaining it in *nonreligious* terms."[150] It is the ascription model, according to Taves, that is conducive to interdisciplinary integration and provides a better hermeneutical approach.

Taves' interdisciplinary call is very noble; but, given her own epistemological approach and its reductive tendencies, the question remains whether such integration would, in fact, help to establish greater understanding of extraordinary religious and mystical experiences or, on the contrary, simply add new flavor to old models of reductive thinking. Such a concern is far from mere speculation as Taves has admitted that her epistemology on experience is an extension and development of Proudfoot's approach, an approach that relies on attribution theory to justify an explanatory reductionism of religious experiences.[151]

Of course, Taves' criticism of the *sui generis* model is valid in articulating that the model inhibits necessary, interdisciplinary attention by isolating religious experiences from other disciplines of study. However, the call for greater interdisciplinary focus, as a means to reaching greater comprehension of religious experiences, would be better suited under a constructive-relational model of interpretation as opposed to the attributional (or ascriptive) model that Taves advances. The problem with Taves' model is that its very foundation is based on a presupposition that leads to predetermined conclusions about the subject. In other words, the approach begins with the presupposition that extraordinary experiences are not inherently religious or mystical but that it is subsequent interpretations and ascriptions which give the

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[150] Ibid., 19.

[151] Taves writes that her attributional approach is an extension of Proudfoot's epistemological work, explaining her goals: "While Proudfoot's argument fueled the constructivist fires of the 1990s and contributed to the growing critique of the sui generis model within religious studies, few scholars of religion followed him into psychology in order to further develop the attributive model for use in religious studies. Now, as the cognitive revolution is sweeping through psychology and is even gaining a foothold in religious studies, it is time to recover and extend Proudfoot's efforts in light of more recent work in psychology." Ibid., 94.

experiences such meaning, hoping therefore to study the process (or phenomenology) of attribution. The issue, therefore, exists in the foundational principle: by claiming that extraordinary experiences are not inherently religious or mystical this approach is, from the very beginning, eliminating significant possibilities for the experience, possibilities which should be considered.

An important point here can be made with reference to Proudfoot's point about reductionism. Proudfoot distinguished between an acceptable reductionism (in what he terms as "explanatory reductionism") and an unacceptable reductionism (in what he terms as "descriptive reductionism"). Similarly, it would not be unreasonable to distinguish between the usage of an acceptable attributional approach and an unacceptable attributional approach in regard to the study of religious experiences. Perhaps one way to formulate this distinction is in the categorization of an "inductive" and a "deductive" attributional approach. The difference can be seen in the way that Taves analyzes Barnard's out-of-body experience.

In considering Barnard's out-of-body experience Taves does not show through an attributional process of explanation that the experience is not inherently mystical—doing this would be an inductive approach. Instead, Taves does the opposite: she presupposes from the beginning that Barnard's out-of-body experience cannot be mystical (as he understands it) and, thereafter, she proceeds, through an attributional process of explanation, to advance a hypothesis that fits the predetermined conclusion of her starting principle. This is a deductive approach. In other words, she is not using attributional phenomenology to grasp the essence of Barnard's experience but to justify her pre-established conclusion about his experience.

The problem in taking this epistemological approach for granted is that there is the serious possibility of setting up one's research upon a flawed principle, thus upon a flawed

foundation. Of course, this is something that the *sui generis* model also needs to account for. However, here it is important to emphasize that the call for interdisciplinary integration, no matter how noble and necessary, cannot by itself be used as a justification for a deductive attributional approach. In other words, it does not matter if Taves is making the noble calling for interdisciplinary integration, and more specifically if she is delving into such integration herself, if the various disciplines that are being integrated are used to support research that is based on an erroneous general principle, a flawed starting point. Such interdisciplinary integration, in essence, becomes not only meaningless but, moreover, *detrimental* to progress in scholarship because it may be using the application of diverse disciplines to advance erroneous ideas.

Proudfoot, as noted earlier, accused perennial thinkers who apply a *sui generis* approach of hiding under a "protective strategy," a protective strategy that defends religious sensibilities against modern scholarship and criticism. Inversely, however, it is not difficult to say that the call for interdisciplinary integration may be used as a "protective strategy" by scholars on the other side of the hermeneutical divide. Here the call for interdisciplinary integration can be used as a protective strategy which defends a deductive attributional approach against criticism, protecting itself in the name of an intellectual integration, thus in the name of advancing scholarship, while avoiding the issue that the approach may be based on an erroneous general principle that does more harm than good to scholarship.[152]

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[152] Finbarr Curtis makes a similar argument, contending that the call for advancing scholarship by violating *sui generis* taboos (or "protective strategies") in the work of Taves and like-minded scholars conveys an intellectual heroism that, at its core, is underlined by an ideological agenda rather than the objective boundaries of cognitive research that such scholars purport to promote. He argues that "Taves and other proponents of cognitive approaches to religious studies fashion a kind of secular praxis in which breaking taboos is a crucial attribute of scholarly integrity and intellectual heroism." Curtis continues: "In calling scholars to violate taboos, Taves alludes to social and institutional ambitions that reach beyond the methodological guidelines for cognitive research." Curtis' points will be examined in greater detail in chapter 4. See Finbarr Curtis, "Ann Taves's *Religious Experience Reconsidered* is a Sign of a Global Apocalypse that Will Kill Us All," *Religion* 40 (2010), 288-289.

Let us, therefore, consider the other side of the debate and, before reaching conclusions, see where the concerns arise by examining the ways in which interdisciplinary approaches to religious and mystical experiences have already been used to promulgate various forms of reductionism.

Religious Experience and Reductionism

The seeds of modern skeptical philosophies and epistemologies toward mystical experiences, whether visionary, auditory or sensory, are strongly rooted in Enlightenment philosophy and have been promulgated by Enlightenment thinkers and their intellectual heirs who questioned the validity and authenticity of mystical or extraordinary experiences between the human and the divine, in the process questioning not just the presence, but also the very existence, of the divine.

David Hume (1711-1776), arguably the preeminent proponent of philosophical skepticism in Enlightenment Europe, argued that the divine, thus God in the monotheistic tradition, is nothing more than a projection of the human being, an illusion of the mind. Inspired by the prevailing presence of hope and fear in human existence, the agitated mind "forms a species of divinity, suitable to itself," Hume argued.[153] Hume, therefore, defined Christian principles and devotional belief (very sardonically) as constituting nothing more than "sick men's dreams" and "the playsome whimsies of monkies in human shape, than the serious,

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[153] David Hume, *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), ed. J.C.A. Gaskin, 127. It is important to note that the secularization thesis—the notion that a major secularization of Western culture emerged during the Enlightenment period—has, in recent years, been challenged by historians. However, even those who challenge the thesis recognize the eminent contribution of skeptical philosophers to the intellectual debates on religious experience present in Enlightenment Europe. See, for instance, the work of Jane Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). While Shaw acknowledges the diversity of religious practices present in Enlightenment Christianity, she does not deny the important impact which skeptics like David Hume or deists like John Toland had on western intellectual thought. See, esp., 144-173. For a work that supports the secularization thesis, see Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Chadwick's point, though ironic, is noteworthy: "Enlightenment was of the few. Secularization is of the many," 9.

positive, dogmatical asseverations of a being, who dignifies himself with the name of rational."[154]

Likewise, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), an intellectual inheritor of Hume's skeptical rationalism, took the psychological approach toward reproaching both the Christian faith and its alleged mysticism in his work *The Essence of Christianity*, advancing a form of psychological skepticism into post-Enlightenment thought which similarly depicted religious beliefs as desperate constructions of the human mind that, at their core, constitute nothing more than imaginary projections.[155] He argued that theology is "nothing more than an imaginary psychology and anthropology."[156] In other words, the great theological ideas constituting religious belief, ideas about God, existence, meaning, mysticism, etc., are all just constructions of the human mind and, therefore, the invention of human beings.[157] Such a psychologically reductionist approach toward the study of religion and religious experiences has been pervasively promulgated, highly influencing modern thinkers.[158] Similarly, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), with his influential "death of God" discourse in the early twentieth century, argued that belief in an otherworldly God is meant to give meaning to life and importance to humans as being the

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[154] Ibid., Hume, 184.

[155] See Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books). For Feuerbach's critiques of mysticism, see esp., 87-100.

[156] Ibid., 88-89.

[157] "Feuerbach writes: "indeed, it is precisely our task to show that theology is nothing else than an unconscious, esoteric pathology, anthropology, and psychology, and that therefore real anthropology, real pathology, and real psychology have far more claim to the name of theology than has theology itself, because this is nothing more than an imaginary psychology and anthropology." Ibid., 88-89.

[158] Among the most prominent thinkers that have been influenced by Feuerbach's views on religion are Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Hans Küng explains: "Like Marx's opium theory at an earlier stage, Freud's illusion theory is grounded in Feuerbach's projection theory." See Hans Küng, *Freud and the Problem of God*, enlarged edition, trans. Edward Quinn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 75. See also W.W. Meissner, S.J., *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 88.

center of the universe, but such belief is, in its essence, "nothing more than a human projection," in other words a fanciful delusion meant to accommodate human desires.[159]

A significant trend to develop in the study of religious and mystical experiences is the scholarly tendency of denigrating reported supernatural experiences with dismissive reductionism in the form of alternative explanations for such experiences. Thus, in this sense, the study of religious experience has gained (perhaps unwanted) interdisciplinary attention from other areas of study, as other areas have been used to promote reductionist epistemologies concerning such experiences.

Sidney Callahan, a scholar of religion and psychology, has isolated at least three major categories to which scholars tend to reduce extraordinary religious and mystical experiences with alternative explanations, *stemming from alternative disciplines of study*: 1) neurological/psychiatric reductionism; 2) psychoanalytical reductionism; and 3) secular-sociological reductionism. It is important to note that Callahan's attention is directed toward the more extravagant forms of mysticism, often associated with medieval and early-modern female spirituality: visionary, apparitional, ecstatic, auditory, sensory experiences, and inner-locutions. Thus, here we are not necessarily dealing with simpler, cultivated spiritual experiences formed by prayer or meditation, but with phenomena which are much more spontaneous and unique.

Neurological/Psychiatric Reductionism

Beginning with the neurological/psychiatric reductionism through which such experiences have been examined, Callahan acknowledges: "Suspicions that religious beliefs and fervent religious experiences are a form of mental pathology still prevail in our world."[160] Amy

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[159] Cited from Nelstrop, Magill, and Onishi, *Christian Mysticism*, 233. For Nietzsche's original discourse on the "death of God," see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. J. Nauckhoff and A. Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119-120.
[160] Callahan, *Women Who Hear Voices*, 1.

Hollywood, Harvard scholar of Christian mysticism and medieval history, similarly points out that extraordinary religious experiences, particularly mystical experiences, are often denigrated by skeptical scholars through neurological and psychiatric categories as simply constituting a form of hysteria, among other possible natural disorders.[161] Hollywood explains that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such diagnoses became prominent. She highlights the influence of the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893), who was "so important in the modern medical study of hysteria because of his insistence that hysteria is a disease of the nerves rather than a sign of moral degeneration, malingering, and laziness" and who "first introduced the reading of mysticism as hysteria in 'La foi qui guerit,' written shortly before his death. There he argues that Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Avila were 'undeniable hysterics' with the ability, nonetheless, to cure hysteria in others."[162] Thus, in this interpretation pathology is associated with the great mystics, as are, somewhat paradoxically, fruits from their alleged pathology. Here psychologists like William James would differ in the sense of articulating that real fruits could not be produced by a pathological experience but are, in fact, indications that the experience must be authentically inspired. Taves explains that "Charcot valued the demystifying role that hysteria could play with regard to miracles, visions, and ecstatic experiences" but, she notes, later in life Charcot "wrote a little-known essay" in which he acknowledged that some of the cures reported at Lourdes, the famous Marian apparition site in France which became known as a healing shrine, were "well attested."[163] Charcot even admitted that he sent some of his own

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[161] Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 243.
[162] Ibid., 243. Hollywood explains that Charcot also attempted to pathologically explain demonic possession as a form of hysteria. See ibid., 347, n. 22. For the original work, see Jean-Martin Charcot and Paul Richer, *Les demoniaques dans l 'art suive de "La foi qui guerit"* (Paris: Macula, 1984).
[163] Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1999), 248.

patients who suffered from "intractable cases of nervous illness" to Lourdes for treatment.[164] Yet, it is the reductive and pathological diagnosis of hysteria that Charcot is most known for in relation to interpreting extraordinary religious experiences.

Though a neurologist, Charcot's theories on religion and hysteria have reached other disciplines of study, influencing various thinkers. The French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) interprets the experiences of most medieval women mystics who have claimed visionary or ecstatic encounters as constituting "a form of erotomania and hysteria," pathological categories highlighting both a Freudian and a Charcotian interpretation.[165] Such diagnoses, as articulated by Charcot and Beauvoir, have permeated (and continue to permeate) much of modern thought on extraordinary religious and mystical experiences. "Most scholars who have wanted to take mysticism seriously have, as a result of such dismissive diagnoses, either avoided the term 'hysteria' entirely or have reserved it for those figures seen as somehow marginal, excessive, or troubling to standard religious categories," Hollywood explains.[166]

Callahan emphasizes that temporal-lobe epilepsy "presents another popular explanation of the pathological source of rapturous religious experiences."[167] Speaking of the reported visionary experiences of medieval Christian mystics, Columbia University neurologist Oliver Sacks articulates the hermeneutical dilemma thus: "It is impossible to ascertain in the vast majority of cases, whether the experience represents a hysterical or psychotic ecstasy, the effects of intoxication or an epileptic or migrainous manifestation."[168]

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[164] Ibid.
[165] As quoted in Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 243.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Callahan, *Women Who Hear Voices*, 11.
[168] As quoted in Callahan, ibid., 10. For original source see Oliver Sacks, "The Visions of Hildegard," in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat: And Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 168.

In observing Sacks' neurological-reductionist approach we must notice at least two important weaknesses in his argument. First, he is specifically making an *assumption, a priori*, about experiences which transpired in the distant, medieval past. Thus, these are experiences which he has not directly and empirically examined. Second, in his assumption of the possible explanations responsible for such experiences, Sacks systematically omits *the possibility* of a genuine mystical experience as something to even consider. In light of his neurological (and, therefore, pathological) alternatives, Sacks ignores the option that a genuine spiritual experience may have transpired. No doubt, a materialistic scientism may be driving Sacks' conclusions here. Yet, ironically, by abiding by such an ideological framework, Sacks' conclusions have the *unscientific* quality of omitting the applicability of certain prospects in considering a phenomenon. Thus Sacks partakes in a direct form of neurological reductionism that not only denigrates mystical experiences but, very narrowly, refuses to even consider *the possibility* of other, meaning spiritual, alternatives, which noticeably do not even make his list of explanations.

Scholar Moshe Sluhovsky who, as a historian of religious experience, has concentrated on the darker forms of experience, in demonic possession and exorcisms, likewise points to this reductionist trend in academia, acknowledging the numerous "natural" diagnoses which are employed by many modern scholars to dismiss the validity of reported cases of possession. Such diagnoses include: "insanity, hysteria, paralysis, imbecility, or epilepsy. . . ."[169] The point is reminiscent of how Underhill reductively dismissed every case involving the demonic as hallucinatory in nature, even in the experiences of great mystics such as Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila, notwithstanding Underhill's support for the "benevolent" forms of mysticism that these women reported. Today, a most common alternative theory that scholars apply to

[169] Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, 2.

explain symptoms of what appears as demonic possession in a person is dissociative-identity disorder (historically known as multiple personality disorder), an explanation which applies a psychopathological diagnosis to the experience.[170]

Sluhovsky explains that such reductionist explanations are especially popular among many contemporary scholars examining late-medieval and early-modern accounts of possession. Yet Sluhovsky concludes that stereotyping Christians of past centuries, particularly of early-modern Europe, as ignorant of medical or psychological causes for abnormal (if not paranormal) behavior constitutes an erroneous approach, if not an altogether arrogant dismissal, obstructing serious study of such cases.[171] Since matters like hysteria and epilepsy were "all classifications of afflictions that were not unfamiliar to early modern people" the assumption "that medieval and early modern people were simply not sophisticated enough to know the right meanings of the symptoms they experienced and witnessed tells us more about modern scholarly arrogance than about premodern ailments and healing techniques, or about early modern configurations of the interactions with the divine," Sluhovsky concludes.[172]

Psychoanalytical Reductionism

The second form of reductionism which Callahan lists belongs to the discipline of psychoanalysis. Callahan specifically observes the theories of Freudian atheists interested in

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[170] See Callahan, *Women Who Hear Voices*, 14-15.

[171] "The cultural construction and historical mutations of possession warn us against trying to 'translate' possession (both diabolical and divine) into modern medical and/or psychological therapeutic categories, and against superimposing sociological and anthropological insights from other cultural settings to explain the Catholic configuration of possession. . . . In all cases of both divine and diabolical possessions, there was something that persuaded contemporaries that they were confronting a diabolic or divine causality or context, rather than 'organic' illness such as insanity, hysteria, paralysis, imbecility, epilepsy, all classifications of afflictions that were not unfamiliar to early modern people. A demonic or divine etiology existed in their classificatory system side by side with naturalist definitions. If they chose, however, not to employ these 'natural' categories and, instead, ascribed the behaviors to 'possession,' it was not a result of the inadequacy of their intelligence or medical knowledge." Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, 2-3.

[172] Ibid., 2-3.

denigrating religious experiences. She notes that many "psychoanalytical thinkers following Freud's lead see religious experience of all kinds as rising from the unconscious mind's wishful fulfillment and regression to infantile experiences."[173] The Freudian perspective essentially is one of complete constructivism as it postulates that all "religious beliefs are constructed in order to deny and defend against death and the powerless vulnerability of humanity in the face of a remorseless meaningless universe," Callahan explains. "For Freudian atheists, human beings regress to magical thinking and use their mental capacities to construct religious myths that give meaning to life."[174]

Freud's ideas are not completely original in regard to religion, but largely inspired by the thought of Feuerbach. W.W. Meissner explains that Freud's ideas of religious beliefs as wish fulfillment, as "illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind" are not without a precursor: "Freud was not the first to advance this idea; he follows the lead of Feuerbach, who regarded theology as a disguised form of anthropology and related religious ideas to dreams."[175] Hans Küng, likewise, explains that before Freud it was Feuerbach who "produced a psychological substantiation of atheism: wishes, fantasies, or the power of the imagination are responsible for the projection of the idea of God and of the whole religious pseudo- or dream-world. Like Marx's opium theory at an earlier stage, Freud's illusion theory is grounded in Feuerbach's projection theory."[176] Where Freud's originality lies is in defining the understanding of religion as an illusion in psychoanalytical categories.[177]

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[173] Callahan, *Women Who Hear Voices*, 16.
[174] Ibid., 17.
[175] Meissner, *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience*, 88.
[176] Küng, *Freud and the Problem of God*, 75.
[177] Ibid., 76.

The experience of mystical union is one for which Freud applied the terminology of an "oceanic feeling,"[178] arguing that this feeling of oneness which mystical experiences describe is, in fact, a regression to an earlier, infantile experience, as he hypothesizes about a unitive feeling that infants apparently experienced—a feeling wherein the self-other dichotomy is transcended for a seeming oneness—in relation to their nurturing mothers. Thus, similarly:

> A religious person reporting mystical experiences of God or the Infinite is falsely identifying his or her regression into an infantile state. Experiences of a divine presence, along with beliefs in God, are actually products of regression; they represent a flight from rational reality into unconsciously dominated forms of primitive thinking. Persons will take comfort in the illusion that a benevolent deity, like a powerful parent, will fulfill their wishes to be taken care of as well as their need to be forgiven for their sins. Guilt feelings stemming from archaic and intentional lapses into wrongdoing can be assuaged through religious rituals and belief. Finally, and most importantly, skeptics aver that superstitious religious beliefs in immortality help humankind deny the all but unbearable reality that they are going to die.[179]

In addition to the experience of mystical union as being understood, in Freudian parlance, as an "oceanic feeling" that takes one back to a regressed, infantile state, the experience of ecstasy is explained in Freudian interpretation as being based on a repressed eroticism, which constitutes

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[178] "Oceanic feeling" was a phrase first used in a correspondence between Romain Rolland and Freud in regard to religion and extraordinary experiences. In a letter dated December 5, 1927, Rolland had written to Freud about the "oceanic feeling," shortly after Freud's publication of *The Future of an Illusion*, one of Freud's major works on religion which Rolland was replying to. Freud subsequently wrote in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that the "views expressed by the friend whom I so much honour [Rolland], and who himself once praised the magic of illusion in a poem, caused me no small difficulty. I cannot discover this 'oceanic' feeling in myself." Interestingly, Freud's admission is not dissimilar from that of William James who, in an essay on mysticism, wrote: "Much interest in the subject of religious mysticism has been shown in philosophical circles of late years. Most of the writings I have seen have treated the subject from the outside, for I know of no one who has spoken as having the direct authority of experience in favor of his views. I also am an outsider. . . ." However, G. William Barnard argues that to say that James was an outsider to experience is far from true. "While it is obvious that James is by no means a 'professional mystic,' at the same time, it is also apparent that he has had many, often quite dramatic, and typically unasked for, experiences that struck *him* as being 'quasi-mystical.' After all, as James himself admits in this essay [A Suggestion about Mysticism], it was several of these recent personal experiences that prompted him to propose once again a theory that could account for these sudden and powerful alterations of consciousness." See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1961), 11, n. 2; William James, "A Suggestion about Mysticism" in *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Feb 17, 1910), 85; James' essay is also available in Richard Woods, *Understanding Mysticism*, 215-222; and G. William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 61.

[179] Callahan, *Women Who Hear Voices*, 17.

the unconscious sexual origin of such states. Here spiritual ecstasy is interpreted as a form of sexual orgasm—the spiritual ecstasy would be a substitute for sexual fulfillment for the mystic, who often is a consecrated celibate—and a major reason for this interpretation is the erotic language and imagery that many saints and mystics apply to describe their ecstatic experiences. Callahan explains that such a critique has especially been prominent in regard to female ecstatic experiences,[180] articulating that "women's purported eroticism could be seen as the unconscious sexual origin of the ecstasies of female saints. The erotic language used by mystics and the erotic quality of religious ecstasies were seen by psychoanalytic skeptics as obvious substitutes for sexual fulfillment."[181]

Meissner explains that psychoanalysis "has followed a path, with rare exceptions, of seeing religious experience in essentially reductive or, even more prejudicially, psychopathological terms. The analytic emphasis has tended to fall on the unconscious and irrational aspects of religious behavior."[182] Meissner admits that Freud's own biases played a major influence on this reductive trend in psychoanalysis. Freud's very first essay on religion, published in 1907 and called "Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices," compared the

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[180] Modern scholars, Amy Hollywood explains, make a distinction between "female mysticism" and "male mysticism," identifying the former as very bodily, affective, experiential, visionary and even sensual and erotic, the kind of mysticism associated with Angela of Foligno, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Teresa of Avila, among others. The latter type of mysticism, associated with males, is identified as intellectual and apophatic, the kind of mysticism seen in figures like Pseudo-Dionysius. Hollywood argues, however, that the distinction "does not quite fit the evidence," seeing prominent exceptions to this gender-specific categorizing: "The twelfth-century Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux, the greatest of the male monastic commentators on the Song of Songs, both initiated and provided the vocabulary and images for erotic mysticism of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The thirteenth century beguine, Marguerite Porete, on the other hand, eschewed visionary experience and erotic ecstasies in favor of an absolute union of the annihilated soul with the divine." Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 8. For an examination of the Songs of Songs as the text inspiring an erotic mysticism in medieval writing and spirituality, see Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995). Also see Constance M. Furey, "Sexuality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, eds. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Beckman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 328-340.

[181] Callahan, *Women Who Hear Voices*, 18.

[182] Meissner, *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience*, vii.

neurotically obsessive and compulsive behavior of Freud's OCD patients with religious rituals, postulating that religion at its core must be a form of neurosis.[183] This would be a foundational principle for all Freudian interpretations of religion and religious experiences. "The Freudian supposition relates more specifically to the intrapsychic aspects of religious experience; namely, it implies that all religious behavior and belief is a form of obsessive-compulsive neurosis."[184]

William Rogers has summed up Freud's main ideas on religion with great precision, explaining that Freud:

> . . . identified a whole series of potentially neurotic functions symptomized in religious life, most having their origins in psychosexual development. Religion from this perspective was seen as potentially obsessive-compulsive in its ritual dimensions, a return of repressed guilt or repressed fear of death, a neurotic "wish" for a longed-for father correlative with unresolved Oedipal strivings, a projection onto the cosmic screen of unacknowledged fears and longings for omnipotence, a regression to infantile forms of helplessness and dependence, or perhaps above all an illusory self-deception by which people imagine the security and solace of a loving God, a purposive history, and a stable moral base to protect them from the inevitable suffering, anguish, and death experiences in a hostile reality.[185]

Conversely, Rogers emphasizes that the criticisms of psychoanalytical reductionisms of religion have been extensive, and he stresses that the most "telling challenge" to the psychoanalytic framework has come in the form of recognizing the present "psychogenic fallacy."[186] Here what is being enunciated is that any truth claims to objective reality must be determined on grounds other than the psychogenesis of the claim itself, meaning beyond the subjective wish or desire that is grounded in psychoanalytical phenomenology, which essentially exists as theory. Thus

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[183] See Sigmund Freud, "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices" (1907) in Peter Gay, ed., *The Freud Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989, reissued 1995), 429. Freud's other major works on religion are *Totem and Taboo* (1912), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939).
[184] Meissner, *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience*, 58.
[185] William R. Rogers, "Interdisciplinary Approaches to Moral and Religious Development: A Critical Overview," in *Toward Moral and Religious Maturity: The First International Conference on Moral and Religious Development*, eds. James Fowler and Antoine Vergote (Morristown, NJ: Silver Burdett, 1980), 31.
[186] Ibid., 31.

Rogers articulates the epistemological issue: "the logical insistence that the possibility of psychologically unconscious motivations related to fear or longing or any other unacknowledged need does not constitute a valid judgment about the existence or nonexistence, the reality or unreality, of that object or force which is desired (or found to be meeting that need)."[187] Wishful thinking, infantile regressions, and repressed psychosexual desires in the human being, whether actually present or not, do not constitute evidence that can make the judgment whether God does or does not exist.

Secular-Sociological Reductionism

The final reductionist angle which Callahan considers is secular-sociological approaches to religious experiences. Proponents of the secular-sociological model argue that perceived mystical experiences do stem from an individual's preexistent belief system which, consequently, does not only interpret but, moreover, *attributes* the individual's taught and socialized concepts and ideas to the experience. Essentially it is a constructivist idea. Thus, in this matter, human beings construct their spiritual experiences from the general cognitive beliefs of society which they have been socialized and taught to assume. According to this logic, the "erroneous attributions and internalized social judgments of a group are being projected upon internal and external phenomena, so that the internal experiences are thought of as coming from God."[188]

Where the secular-sociological model falls short is that it makes a self-defeating argument. In other words, it could be inversely used against its proponents. For example, if we take a reductionist thinker like Sacks (albeit from the neurological category), could we not say that in assuming that medieval mystics must have suffered from some form of "hysterical or

[187] Ibid.
[188] Callahan, *Women Who Hear Voices*, 25.

psychotic ecstasy, the effects of intoxication or an epileptic or migrainous manifestation" Sacks is, himself, *constructing* his explanations from the general intellectual beliefs of a society into which he has been socialized and taught to assume to be true, and, thereafter, attributing them to phenomena he does not really understand? In other words, if the secular-sociologist argument claims that medieval mystics construct God through preexistent cultural and religious indoctrination (since their medieval culture was so religious), thus succumbing to a particular belief system, why not assume that secular-sociologists or *neurologists* construct their own alternative explanations for mystical experiences through preexistent cultural indoctrination (since contemporary Western culture is very secular), thus succumbing to a certain belief system?

Considering all of the aforementioned interpretations of extraordinary religious and mystical experiences, it is not difficult to discern why many adherents of the *sui generis* model are cautious about interdisciplinary integration as a means to better understand experience. The issue, or caution, concerning interdisciplinary integration is reductionism, as so many disciplines of study, from modern philosophy to psychoanalysis and psychology, to neurology and sociology, have been used as a means to *explain away* (a significant difference from simply *explain*) extraordinary religious experiences. In this regard, distinctions that Proudfoot made between descriptive and explanatory reductionism, arguing that the former gives the latter a bad name, appear to remain superficial, as it is the *explaining away* (thus the explanatory reductionism) of religious experiences that is a central concern to those who avoid reductionist hermeneutics. Of course, this does not mean that the *sui generis* model should stand and that interdisciplinary integration should be avoided. No. Perhaps what is necessary is an interdisciplinary integration that takes a more cognitive and empirical approach toward testing

extraordinary religious experiences—as disciplines like psychoanalysis, philosophy, and sociology rely highly on theory to reach their conclusions—and a hermeneutical framework that considers the integrity of religious experiences alongside interdisciplinary attention. This would be different from the epistemologies that Proudfoot, Taves, and like-minded thinkers have applied which, from the beginning, presume the general principle that experiences are not innately religious or mystical and, therefore, hope to apply interdisciplinary attention to ascribe different meaning to such experiences. An alternative would be the constructive-relational model, which considers the integrity of the original religious experience, thus keeping that possibility open instead of dismissing it as a foundational principle, and which applies interdisciplinary integration as a means to better understand the experience. A major difference is that this hermeneutical model does not begin with the general principle that certain explanations cannot be valid, such as the experience being inherently religious or mystical, but leaves the possibility open while considering the various contributions of interdisciplinary integration. Combining such a hermeneutical model with sciences whose conclusions come from highly empirical examination can help to formulate a more knowledgeable, and less presumptuous, understanding of religious experiences. Let us now turn to a highly empirical science that has in recent years been used to directly examine religious experiences.

Moving Toward Neuroscience and New Methodology

While the foregoing models of reductionism toward studying mysticism, the neurological, psychoanalytical, and sociological, may offer interesting theories for extraordinary religious experiences, the most obvious limitation that they possess is that all propose theories, *a priori*. In other words, direct examination, meaning empirical investigation of experience, is not necessarily involved in their evaluations but solely postulations. One can argue, of course, that sociology, however, as one of the examined categories, is a highly empirical field. That may be,

but it is an empirical field which is able to examine external measures. The claims of mystics and persons who report extraordinary experiences, on the other hand, are claims about interiority, about inner phenomena. How could one measure the interiority of a spiritual experience?

In recent years scholars have begun doing just that by applying neuroscientific technologies to the study of religious experiences. This is different from Sacks' neurological reductionism, which applied no empirical examination to the study of mystical experiences but simply postulated that such experiences cannot be authentic by offering neurological theories as alternative, pathological explanations to account for the experiences of medieval mystics. Callahan explains, on the other hand, how technologies of contemporary neuroscience have finally been able to penetrate the interior depths of altered states of consciousness:

> In the twentieth century, scientific investigations using new brain imaging techniques have begun to explore altered states of consciousness, starting with sleep and dreaming and going on to studies of meditating adepts. One result of this is the slowly emerging understanding that altered states of consciousness and trances, whether induced or spontaneous, need not always be diagnosed as psychotic.[189]

Andrew Newberg and Eugene D' Aquili, two pioneering scholars in the neuroscientic study of religious experiences, have made the much bolder claim that: "It is possible that with the advent of improved technologies for studying the brain, mystical experiences may finally be differentiated from any type of psychopathology."[190]

With the advent of neuroscience, as a mechanism that allows direct study of altered states of consciousness, much methodological progress is being made and can still be made. Here the study of extraordinary religious and mystical experience is being taken beyond textual analysis, beyond the texts left over by the great mystics from hundreds of years ago, to direct scientific examination of experience using the human person as a document of study. James used the

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[189] Callahan, *Women Who Hear Voices*, 12.
[190] Quoted in John Horgan, *Rational Mysticism*, 75.

terminology of *documents humains* in identifying his methodology, as he concentrated on the accounts of extraordinary religious experiences of individual persons as his documents of examination in formulating his Gifford Lectures. Here, however, in the application of neuroscience, the phraseology of *documents humains* becomes even more real and immediate, as concentration is not given to *accounts* of individual experience, but to the actual experiences themselves, directly examined by modern technology.

Newberg has made the argument that the neuroscientific study of spiritual practices and religious experiences "may also be one of the most important areas of research that can be pursued by science in the next decade."[191] Callahan noted that neuroscientific, brain-imaging technologies have already been used to study sleep and dream states as well as meditation states; and, in recent years a lot of new scholarship has been dedicated to such studies. Of course, since such states are cultivated through pre-existent efforts (whether natural or spiritual) they are easier to "produce" and, therefore, easier to study, as opposed to more unique and spontaneous states, such as visionary, apparitional, or out-of-body experiences as the type reported by Barnard, which are rarer in their spontaneity and, one could argue, *greater* in the gravity and consequentialism of their reported content. This is where the case of Medjugorje, which we will turn to in the next chapter, becomes significant for scholarly research, as it constitutes a case wherein a unique and spontaneous phenomenon, an alleged Marian apparition (or, in the language of mystical theology, a corporal vision), has been reported and has been subjected to exhaustive scientific study.

[191] Andrew B. Newberg, *Principles of Neurotheology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 186.

Summary

Perennialists and constructivists have, throughout their debates, fought over the proper hermeneutics for understanding extraordinary religious and mystical experiences. The traditional perennialist position came under scrutiny and challenge in the late twentieth-century, when Steven Katz and fellow constructivists began publishing works that question perennial notions of religious experience; notions which identified extraordinary religious experiences as unmediated, universal, and transcending historical categories with an essentialism that is *sui generis*, in a class of its own. The subsequent work of Wayne Proudfoot and Ann Taves added to the debate, in many ways renewing constructivist conclusions through an interdisciplinary phenomenology that uses attribution theory to study religious and mystical experiences.

Traditional perennialism also witnessed an intellectual renewal through the work of Robert Forman and fellow neo-perennialists, writing of a pure conscious experience that (refreshing perennial ideas of an unmediated, cross-cultural universalism) pointed to the presence of a *content-less*, mystical experience across religious traditions that purportedly transcends the epistemological framework of a constructivist hermeneutic. Neo-perennialist scholarship has further led to the reexamination of the foundational philosophy that constructivism is based on by tackling the underlying issue of Kantian epistemology, and the fundamental question of whether Kant's thinking has been misapplied in constructivist interpretations of extraordinary religious and mystical experiences. Whether it is constructivist scholars who misapply Kant's epistemology to extraordinary experiences or whether it is Anthony Perovich, with his neo-perennialist critique, remains to be answered, however, as evident holes have been observed here in Perovich's critique which could be used against his own thesis.

Beyond influencing hermeneutical and epistemological questions of experience in religious studies, itself a major matter, there is a bigger picture that underlies the current neo-

perennialist and constructivist debate. It is the issue of debating institutional frameworks of thinking which have permeated intellectual culture. Particularly, in challenging constructivism, neo-perennialists are challenging the dominant model of thinking that has influenced the humanities after the linguistic turn; challenging, therefore, not just scholars of religion but an entire, established way of thinking about scholarship in academia. Inversely and even previously, by challenging traditional perennialism, constructivists were fighting a dominant *sui generis* model within religious studies that resisted interdisciplinary integration and isolated religious experience into a class of its own which purported to transcend socio-historical categorization.

The caution, if not downright fear, that adherents of the *sui generis* model had toward interdisciplinary integration is found in the underlying issue of reductionism, the concern that other disciplines of study would be used not to explain, but to explain *away*, religious experience in light of natural or pathological modes of interpretation. This fear was not without merit, as many nineteenth and twentieth-century scholars have used theories from other disciplines of study, such as psychoanalysis, neurology, psychology, and sociology, to denigrate accounts of extraordinary religious and mystical experiences with dismissive interpretations, or *diagnoses*, of such experiences. Scholars like Taves have called for greater interdisciplinary integration in the study of religious experience. However, the limitations of Taves' own deductive attributional model (or, her ascriptive model), operating under the assumption that the general principle that she starts with must be correct, shows that the otherwise noble call for interdisciplinary integration is not *by itself* enough reason to justify such a hermeneutical approach. Interdisciplinary research, if based on a fallacious starting point, can do more harm than good to the cause of advancing scholarship on religious experience. Taves' treatment of Barnard's out-of-body experience is one example of the possibility of this risk. The risk of false conclusions is

highly present if Taves and like-minded scholars begin with the general principle, or presupposition, that extraordinary experiences are not inherently religious or mystical—a bold claim, yet one that is assumed and not proven. To be sure, with a naturalistic approach Taves should be able to examine as much as can be naturalistically known about a religious or mystical experience but without crossing into the metaphysical realm of making ontological assumptions—which cannot be empirically verified, violating the boundaries of a naturalistic hermeneutic—about the origins of an experience.[192]

The recent move toward neuroscience in studying religious experiences presents greater hope for making methodological and hermeneutical progress in the understanding of such topics. Neuroscience has already been used to study sleep and meditative states; however, when speaking about *extraordinary* or *mystical* experiences more unique phenomena come to mind, such as apparitions, visions, and ecstasy. Such phenomena are rare, and it is therefore rare to see such states of consciousness being subjected to modern scientific study. However, the case of Medjugorje presents an example of very rare phenomena (alleged Marian apparitions) being subjected to in-depth scientific examination. Let us, therefore, turn to Medjugorje and see what contribution, if any, can the studies on the apparitions make to discourses on extraordinary religious and mystical experiences.

[192] James V. Spickard presents the most convincing critique of Taves' approach in this regard, arguing that her metaphysical assumptions undermine the naturalistic claims of Taves' methodological goals. Spickard's critique will be considered in detail in chapter 4. See James V. Spickard, "Does Taves Reconsider Experience Enough? A Critical Commentary on *Religious Experience Reconsidered,*" *Religion* 40 (2010): 311-313.

Chapter 3
"Between the Mountains"

On June 24, 1981, in a little village located between the mountains of central Yugoslavia, four Croatian teenagers reported that the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus, had appeared to them. The following day two more Croatian youths, this time a teenage girl and a ten year-old boy, would also report experiencing the same phenomenon alongside the others, claiming to see an apparition of the Virgin Mary. The six Medjugorje visionaries were between the ages of 10 and 17 when the apparitions began: Jakov Colo (age 10), Ivanka Ivankovic (age 15), Ivan Dragicevic (age 16), Marija Pavlovic (age 16), Mirjana Dragicevic (age 16), and Vicka Ivankovic (age 17). Three of the visionaries, as adults today, report continuing to experience daily apparitions of Mary: these three are Ivan, Marija, and Vicka.[1] The village of Medjugorje,

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[1] See Mark I. Miravalle, *The Message of Medjugorje: The Marian Message to the Modern World* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 1-6; Randall Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective: An Investigation of Holy Visions* (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2004), 67-107; Mary Craig*, Spark from Heaven: The Mystery of the Madonna of Medjugorje* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1988), 11-20; Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary*, 233-240; Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 3-41, 121-150; Wayne Weible, *Medjugorje: The Message* (Orleans, MD: Paraclete Press, 1989), 6-25. The vast majority of literature on Medjugorje constitutes devotional and apologetic works from religious presses; however, a small number of academic and journalistic works have been published on the topic. Miravalle's book (constituting the author's doctoral dissertation) is the most comprehensive theological examination of the messages of Medjugorje, studying their veracity within the Catholic tradition through a hermeneutic of continuity that considers the Medjugorje messages in light of the teachings of the Church Fathers, the Second Vatican Council, and major – Church-approved – apparitions such as Lourdes and Fatima. Sullivan's book (a journalistic account) provides the most comprehensive and in-depth account of the history of the apparitions as well as the varieties of scientific studies conducted on the visionaries throughout the decades. Craig's journalistic account provides an informative overview of the early years of the apparitions, covering historical, anthropological, and ecclesial elements regarding the apparitions, as well as the major scientific studies conducted on the visionaries during the 1980s. The book by Zimdars-Swartz is one of the first academic works dedicated specifically to the phenomena of Marian apparitions; her section on Medjugorje covers the subject of *secrets*, as the Medjugorje visionaries have reported receiving secrets from the Virgin that allegedly are to affect the world (similarly to claims made by other Marian visionaries, such as the children of Fatima). The work by Weible, a former journalist, is one of the most popular devotional books on the subject, combining a firsthand journalistic account with a believer's devotion for the authenticity of the apparitions. As Zimdars-Swartz points out, however, sources on Medjugorje do disagree on certain facts; Weible is an example. His understanding of how the Medjugorje visionaries are to transmit the secrets that they allegedly receive from the Virgin is different from René Laurentin's understanding, as articulated in his work *The Apparitions at Medjugorje Prolonged*, trans. J. Lohre Stiens (Milford, OH: The Riehle Foundation, 1987). See Zimdars-Swartz*, op. cit*., 237. It is noteworthy that conflicting facts between Medjugorje authors have, most often, been present in regard to secondary information

where these events began and allegedly continue to transpire, is in modern day Bosnia-Herzegovina. The etymology of the village's name speaks well to its rural and isolated location in the midst of the mountains of Bosnia-Herzegovina, since in Croatian *Medju* means "in between" and *gorje* "mountains." It was not, however, on one of the surrounding mountains but on a local hillside that the visionaries first reported to experience a supernatural encounter, alleging to witness an apparition.

The visionaries reported that the apparition of the Virgin Mary appeared to them luminously as a beautiful young woman in a grey dress, wearing a white veil. The visionaries would later describe her as having blue eyes, long dark hair, rosy cheeks, radiating a mystical beauty that words could not capture. She was, that first evening, protectively holding the baby Jesus in her arms, the visionaries claimed, as she looked down the hill toward the frightened and mesmerized youngsters. The visionaries experienced an admixture of feelings at the sighting. "We didn't know what to do, where to put ourselves," Ivanka, who was the first to report seeing the apparition, explained. "We felt a mixture of joy and fear. So much joy, yet so much fear, it's impossible to describe."[2]

(see, as another example, note 94 below). However, the primary details of the history of the apparitions have been consistent in most works, although some works (like that of Sullivan and Craig) are more informative in the detail they provide. Though showing evident favor for the apparitions, Weible's work is useful for scholarly, and specifically historical, purposes as it provides a firsthand account of some of the major events and figures of the early years of the apparitions. Weible was present, for example—and provides a lively account of the event—when the then-bishop of Mostar Pavao Zanic gave a (now) notorious homily in the parish of Medjugorje in July 1987, making his opposition public through a condemnation of the apparitions. It was that opposition which made Medjugorje an increasingly controversial subject in the Catholic Church. See Weible, 274-282. The book by Kraljevic, a Franciscan priest who was present during the beginning of the apparitions, provides a valuable historical account. His is the first book on Medjugorje to be translated into English, and provides original interviews with the visionaries and with one of the earliest doctors to examine the seers as their experiences were unfolding. The greatest area of difference between authors is in interpretation of the authenticity of the apparitions. Miravalle and Weible are proponents of the authenticity of the apparitions; Craig provides a Jungian psychological theory in postulating a natural explanation for the apparitions; while Sullivan and Zimdars-Swartz leave the question open.

[2] Quoted in Craig, *Spark from Heaven*, 15.

On the second day of the apparitions, when all six visionaries reported seeing the Virgin, the apparition was allegedly standing on Podbrdo, a large, rocky hill that takes much effort and time to climb. A crowd gathered around the seers that evening. The apparition signaled for the youngsters to come up to her, summoning them. Then according to villagers something astonishing happened, something that villagers would believe was an unexplainable phenomenon. As if moved by an invisible force, the children advanced up the rocky hill, together, in a super-human speed, a speed that transcended their normal capacities. Through brambles and sharp stones, they seemed to fly up the hill toward the apparition. Vicka said that it "was not like walking on the ground" but felt "as if something had pulled us through the air. I was afraid. I was also barefoot, but no thorns had scratched me."[3]

Amongst the villagers who tried to run up with them was Jozo Ostojic. Jozo was only twelve but well known in the village for setting a regional record for the hundred-meter dash. Some day he would be on the Olympic team, villagers said. When Jozo saw the children soaring up the hill, it was little Jakov, the 10 year-old seer, who surprised him most. He would testify with amazement to what transpired:

> Jakov was two years younger than me, and not really athletic; normally I can outrun him by a huge distance. But on this day, I can't come close to keeping up with him. He and the others seemed to be flying up that hill. There is no path, just rocks and thornbushes, but all six of them are moving at an incredible speed, bounding from rock to rock, taking enormous strides. I am running as fast as I can, but falling further and further behind, and so are the grown men running with me. We are gasping for breath, almost in tears, unable to believe what is happening.[4]

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[3] Quoted in Joseph A. Pelletier, A.A., *The Queen of Peace Visits Medjugorje* (Worcester, MA: Assumption Publication, 1985), 15.
[4] Quoted in Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 79.

BBC reporter Mary Craig explains that Mirjana's uncle was present that evening at the hill and he later recalled: "It takes at least twelve minutes to get up there. Yet they did it in two. It scared me to death."[5]

The Messages and Secrets of Medjugorje

In Medjugorje the apparition, according to the visionaries, would identify herself as the "Queen of Peace,"[6] a traditional title for the Virgin Mary in Catholic devotion. Her messages to the visionaries stressed that God exists and emphasized the need for people to return to a spirituality of prayer, fasting, a renewal of reading Scriptures and active participation in the sacraments.[7] As happened in Fatima, Portugal, in 1917, in Medjugorje the visionaries have also claimed to have been given a set of secrets by the Virgin. Each visionary is supposed to receive ten secrets, which allegedly pertain to the Church and to monumental events that will affect the world; these include a number of chastisements for the sins of the world. As of today, three of the visionaries – Ivanka, Mirjana, and Jakov – claim to have received all ten secrets and (consequently) no longer experience daily apparitions. The other three visionaries – Vicka, Ivan, and Marija – claim to have received nine of ten secrets and continue to report experiencing daily apparitions. It is believed that the *daily* apparitions of the visionaries will conclude once all receive their tenth secret, which will reportedly happen when the events described in the secrets begin to unfold.[8]

The story of six Croatian children who began receiving apparitions of the Virgin Mary in 1981 has gripped many people. Medjugorje has become a global phenomenon, a site visited by millions of pilgrims worldwide. Author Elizabeth Ficocelli explains that it "is estimated that

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[5] Quoted in Craig, *Spark from Heaven*, 17.
[6] Ibid., 110; Miravalle, *Message of Medjugorje*, xiii.
[7] The most in-depth theological exploration of the content of the Medjugorje messages has been written by Mark Miravalle as his doctoral dissertation; see ibid.
[8] For a good discussion on the secrets of Medjugorje see Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary*, 233-240.

since the events were first reported in 1981, more than 20 million people from around the world have traveled to this obscure village," even during the bloody wars of the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.[9]

The global attention that Medjugorje has received by the faithful has led the Catholic Church to examine and investigate the credibility of the apparitions. In this regard, there has been much controversy surrounding Medjugorje as the apparition site has gained both influential supporters and detractors within the Church. The late pope and saint John Paul II was perhaps Medjugorje's most influential supporter. After his death in 2005, John Paul II's lifelong friends Marek and Zofia Skwarnicki made available letters that he wrote to them in Polish, which positively referenced Medjugorje.[10] In one letter, John Paul II directly referenced the presence of the Virgin Mary in Medjugorje, alleviating ambiguity about his personal conviction on the topic.[11] Moreover, Monsignor Slawomir Oder, the Judicial Vicar of the Appellate Tribunal of the Vicariate of Rome as well as the postulator for the beatification and canonization of John Paul II, dedicated a section in his book *Why He Is a Saint* to examining John Paul II's devotion to the apparitions in Medjugorje as well as recalling the details of a personal meeting that the pope held with visionary Mirjana Dragicevic in 1987.[12] Journalist Randall Sullivan noted that in the Holy

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[9] Elizabeth Ficocelli, *The Fruits of Medjugorje: Stories of True and Lasting Conversion* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 1.

[10] See John Paul II, "List dla Pana Marka Skwarnicki i Pani Zofia Skwarnicka," 8 grudzie 1992; List dla Mana Marka Skwarnicki." Watykan. 28 maja 1992; "List dla Pana Marka Skwarnicki i Pani Zofia Skwarnicka." Watykan, 25 lutego 1994; "List dla Pana Marka Skwarnicki I Pani Zofia Skwarnicka." Castel Gandolfo, 3 września 1994. All available in Denis Nolan, *Medjugorje and the Church*, fourth edition (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Publishing, 2007), 152, 154, 156, 159.

[11] "Teraz chyba lepiej rozumie sie Medjugorie. To jakies 'naleganie' Matki rozumie sie dzis lepiej…" ["Now, however, we have a better understanding of Medjugorje. This type of 'call' from our Mother is better understood today…"]; translation mine, from John Paul II, "List dla Pana Marka Skwarnicki i Pani Zofia Skwarnicka." Watykan, 25 lutego 1994.

[12] Oder dedicates a few pages of his book to documenting John Pau II's support of Medjugorje. The section in the book dedicated to Medjugorje is titled "If I Weren't Pope, I Would Already Be in Medjugorje Confessing" which references a comment that John Paul II made to Medjugorje visionary Mirjana Dragicevic in 1987 when the two

See it was common knowledge that the Polish pope loved Medjugorje, explaining that in Vatican circles John Paul II acquired the nickname "Protector of Medjugorje."[13]

The protection that John Paul II offered Medjugorje included halting a negative judgment on the apparitions from the bishop of Mostar, Pavao Zanic, whose diocese was responsible for Medjugorje and who formed a commission to investigate the apparitions. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under John Paul II's papacy, summoned Bishop Zanic to a meeting and reportedly chastised the bishop, telling him that he disapproved of his methods of investigation.[14] Furthermore, the Prefect of the CDF ordered Bishop Zanic to suspend his negative judgment, dissolve his commission, and place the entire matter of investigating Medjugorje into the hands of the Holy See, which subsequently transmitted the task to the Yugoslav Bishops Conference, who formed a new commission.[15] To add to these actions, not only was Bishop Zanic instructed to no longer involve himself in any future investigations of the apparitions but, furthermore, he was instructed to maintain silence

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had a meeting at Castel Gandolfo. See Slawomir Oder with Saverio Gaeta, *Why He Is a Saint: The Life and Faith of Pope John Paul II and the Case for Canonization* (New York: Rizzoli, 2010), 167-169.

[13] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 43.

[14] According to Craig et al., Zanic had a notorious reputation for making incendiary and often unsubstantiated remarks against the alleged apparitions and visionaries, even after being ordered by the Yugoslav Bishops to maintain silence on the subject until a full investigation is completed. In October 1984 Zanic issued a report to episcopal conferences around the world, which quickly spread throughout the Catholic press, labeling the experiences of the visionaries as a case of "collective hallucination." This statement made Medjugorje an increasingly controversial subject within the Church. Following the report, René Laurentin, who was a part of the 1984 French team that scientifically studied the apparitions of the visionaries, "conveyed his astonishment" at Bishop Zanic's proclamation of "collective hallucination," noting that this claim completely contradicted the medical and scientific tests performed on the visionaries that ruled out any forms of hallucination, as well as any sleep or dream states, during their apparitions. French and Italian doctors from separate investigative teams, Laurentin noted, came to the same conclusions, ruling out such pathological states. See Craig, *Spark from Heaven*, 145, 172; Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 205; Weible, *Medjugorje*, 277. Notably Craig titles her chapter (pages 143-156), recording Zanic's false statement against the experiences of the visionaries, "A Campaign of Disinformation."

[15] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective,* 206; also see Nolan, *Medjugorje and the Church*, 3: "But Cardinal Ratzinger (presently Pope Benedict XVI) rejected these negative conclusions [of Bishop Zanic's commission]. And – an event without precedent in the history of apparitions – the local bishop (Bishop Zanic) was relieved of the dossier. The fact was not widely reported. Rome dissolved Bishop Zanic's commission and then put the matter into the hands of the Yugoslavian Episcopal Conference. A new commission was subsequently appointed under the presidency of Bishop Komarica (of Banja Luka, Bosnia-Hercegovina)."

about Medjugorje altogether as the Yugoslav Bishops pursue their newly assigned work.[16]

Due to the catastrophic wars which broke out in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the Episcopal Conference assigned by the Yugoslav Bishops was never able to finish its work. The Yugoslav Bishops did, however, issue an early declaration (known as "the Zadar Declaration") on the subject in April 1991, which stated:

> On the basis of the investigations so far, it cannot be affirmed that one is dealing with supernatural apparitions and revelations.
>
> However, the numerous gatherings of the great numbers of the faithful from different parts of the world, who are coming to Medjugorje prompted by motives of belief and various other motives, do require attention and pastoral care – in the first place by the Bishop of the diocese and with him also of the other Bishops, so that both in Medjugorje and in everything connected with it a healthy devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary may be promoted in accordance with the teaching of the Church.
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> For this purpose the Bishops will issue specially suitable liturgical-pastoral directives. Likewise, through their Commissions they will continue to keep up with and investigate the entire event in Medjugorje.[17]

It is the first line of this declaration, as noted above, which has caused as much controversy in the Medjugorje debates as the words "subsists in" in *Lumen Gentium* 8 have in ecclesiological discussions. The most controversy has been attached specifically to the words: ". . . so far, it cannot be affirmed that one is dealing with supernatural apparitions and revelations." Medjugorje's critics have interpreted these words as meaning that the reported apparitions are not supernatural. For example, Bishop Zanic's successor in Mostar, Bishop Ratko Peric, who has upheld his predecessor's negative position toward the apparitions, gave a homily in the parish of Medjugorje on June 6, 1993, wherein he invoked the Yugoslavian Bishops' findings to articulate that the apparitions are not supernatural. He explained that the "Commission has declared a **'non**

[16] Weible, *Medjugorje*, 277.
[17] Copy of full declaration available in Nolan, *Medjugorje and the Church*, 175.

constat de supernaturalitate' [it is established that there is nothing supernatural]."[18] However, Franc Perko, the Archbishop of Belgrade, has challenged this interpretation by Peric, who (according to Perko) is misrepresenting the conclusion of the Yugoslav Bishops' declaration. The archbishop explained:

> It is not true that from the document summarized by the bishops at the end of November it expressly follows nothing supernatural is happening in Medjugorje. The bishops wrote: 'non constat de supernaturalitate' (supernaturality is not established) and not: 'constat de non supernaturalitate' (it is established that there is nothing supernatural). This is an enormous difference. The first formulation does not permit itself to be interpreted in a definitive way; it is open to further developments.[19]

Thus, according to this interpretation, *non constat de supernaturalitate*, the statement of the Yugoslav Bishops announced that it was not possible to declare *yet*, within that phase of their investigation, the supernaturalism of the apparitions, but such a possibility does remain open for future consideration and is not excluded. Recent events show that Archbishop Perko was correct in interpreting the Zadar declaration as saying *non constat de supernaturalitate* and, therefore, leaving the case open to future examination instead of conclusively deciding against supernaturality. This is reflected in what transpired in March 2010.

The Holy See made a historic and unprecedented announcement on March 17, 2010. What was announced was the formation of an international Vatican Commission, headed by Cardinal Camillo Ruini under the guidance of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to investigate the apparitions in Medjugorje.[20] This follows the third guideline of the 1978 CDF document *Normae Congregationis*, which was released to provide Church guidelines for investigating private revelations. The document explained how the matter of authority over an

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[18] Ibid., 6; bolding Nolan's.
[19] As quoted in Nolan, ibid., 175.
[20] "Vatican Forms Medjugorje Study Commission," *ZENIT*, 03,17,2010, http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/vatican-forms-medjugorje-study-commission, accessed 10 May 2014.

investigation of an alleged apparition can be moved to the highest jurisdiction of the Church, the Holy See itself. "The Apostolic See can intervene, either at the request of Ordinary [the local bishop] himself, or at the request of a qualified group of the faithful, or directly by virtue of the immediate right of universal jurisdiction of the Sovereign Pontiff."[21] What makes the case of Medjugorje unique on an ecclesiological level, therefore, is the fact that it constitutes an apparition site whose status, for the first time in Church history, will not be decided by a diocesan or regional commission but by an international commission under the control of the Holy See itself.

Discerning the authenticity of Medjugorje is beyond the scope of this writing, the process ultimately being an ecclesial, and not an academic, one. However, the foregoing history of ecclesial involvement was presented to provide a background, and thus necessary context, for examining the scientific studies conducted on the visionaries throughout the past three decades. Let us, therefore, turn our attention to the scientific investigations and data.

Scientific Studies on the Medjugorje Visionaries

Mary Craig has astutely pointed out the importance and uniqueness of the Medjugorje apparitions for scientific study, especially in contrast to former apparitions: "For the first time in all the history of apparitions, science has had an opportunity to investigate extraordinary phenomena while they were actually happening. Medjugorje opened up for the scientist possibilities for research that neither Lourdes nor Fatima had been able to provide."[22] Similarly, former *Rolling Stone Magazine* journalist and best-selling author Randall Sullivan has written: "I would discover eventually that the apparitions in Medjugorje had been subjected to perhaps more

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[21] "Normae Congerationis," *Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19780225_norme-apparizioni_en.html, accessed 11 May 2014.
[22] Craig, *Spark from Heaven*, 133.

medical and scientific examination than any purported supernatural event in the history of the human race. . . ."[23] What, therefore, makes the case of Medjugorje unique in contrast to earlier events is the fact that Medjugorje constitutes a contemporary phenomenon, transpiring in the technologically-advanced periods of the late twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first, and therefore being able to be examined *while transpiring* by the most sophisticated means available to modern science. On a daily basis the six visionaries of Medjugorje entered a deep altered state of consciousness during the same time (5:45 pm in the winter time and 6:45 pm in the summer time) when they fell to their knees and reported experiencing their apparitions of the Virgin Mary. The frequency and timing of this phenomenon, its daily and routine occurrence, allowed scientific teams to study the experiences as they were happening in front of them.

Since as early as 1981, various scientific examinations have been conducted on the visionaries. Early important tests, René Laurentin writes, were made by "Italian doctors who came in large numbers in 1984."[24] However, the most in-depth examinations, Craig explains, were an "extremely important and comprehensive series of tests"[25] conducted by a French team that came shortly thereafter in 1984, and "an important series of tests by Italian doctors"[26] in 1985; these were followed, years later, Sullivan articulates, by "the most extensive scientific testing in more than a decade"[27] on the visionaries by a collaborative team of Italian and Austrian doctors in 1998. Instead of observing these various studies chronologically and individually, an approach that would lead to much repetition in documenting overlapping findings, the approach here will be to examine the studies in juxtaposition with one another on the basis of which

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[23] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 20.
[24] Henri Joyeux and René Laurentin, *Etudes scientifiques et médicales sur les apparitions de Medjugorje* (Paris: O.E.I.L., 1985), 21.
[25] Craig, *Spark from Heaven*, 135.
[26] Ibid., 140.
[27] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 386.

particular set of data is being observed. Let us, therefore, begin with the social and psychological data, examining what conclusions these various teams reached about the mental and social stability of the visionaries, and from there continue on to the other studies.

Behavioral and Psychological Studies

Dr. Giorgio Sanguinetti, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Milan, was part of the 1985 Italian team who examined the visionaries. Interestingly, in desiring to examine the social and psychological stability of the visionaries, Dr. Sanguinetti was less interested in studying the altered state of consciousness that the visionaries enter during their apparitions and more interested in observing their daily lives. He was "given an unusual degree of personal access to the seers" to pursue this.[28] Dr. Sanguinetti was searching for any indication of pathological patterns that were observable in "delirious people with a mystical bent." Such patterns were observed again and again in various cases, most tellingly conveyed in such delirious persons through a sense of omnipotence, which was "not necessarily expressed with noisy insistence or displayed fanatically, but coming across with a quiet, complacent silence," the doctor explained. "This hides the sense of triumph through a privileged relationship with the transcendent."[29] Such individuals have limited capacity for spontaneous communication and little interest in other people, the doctor continued. They tend to display very extravagant and theatrical behavior, and react resentfully when criticized, questioned, or contradicted, showing intolerance when challenged or when presented with opposing viewpoints.[30] After studying the

[28] Ibid., 206.
[29] Quoted in Sullivan, ibid.
[30] Ibid., 206-207. Similarly, Andrew Newberg and his colleagues explain important distinctions between mystics and psychotics, writing that the two "tend to have very different interpretations of the meaning of their experiences. Psychotics in delusional states often have feelings of religious grandiosity and inflated egotistical importance—they may see themselves, for example, as special emissaries from God, blessed with an important message for the world, or with the spiritual power to heal. Mystical states, on the other hand, usually involve a loss of pride and ego, a quieting of the mind, and an emptying of the self—all of which is required before the mystic

daily lives and habits of the Medjugorje seers, Dr. Sanguinetti wrote a detailed report, concluding:

> I consider it of fundamental importance to emphasize that in all my conversations with the young "visionaries" of Medjugorje I have never discovered, on any occasion, any thought, look, conversation, attitude or behavior similar to these pathological states which I have listed. First of all it must be made clear that the "visionaries" live a normal life; they are integrated in their community and in their families and are treated by others as if they were no different from other people, or from themselves before they became "visionaries" . . . they differ from others only in the time they give to the practice of religion and to the visions; all this is done in a very natural way without piosity or complacency; their behavior is by preference discreet and, politely, they try to shield themselves from the overpowering pressure of pilgrims, when this is possible. They are quite often open to conversation and seem patiently resigned to having to answer the same questions; in this they are not effusive, nor are they withdrawn or exhibitionist. On the contrary they look calm and peaceful and gentle. They do not try to convince one, and they do not exceed what is asked of them; their smile is not smug or malicious, and it is not artificial. Their movements reflect only kindness and good will. They certainly are not looking for attention or for an audience; they do not offer interpretations or personal opinions about mystical experiences; all they want to do is report the facts and admit that they are happy.[31]

The apparent normalcy of the seers is something that has impressed, and at times surprised, various investigators who have met the visionaries. A year before Dr. Sanguinetti arrived with the Italian team, a French team of doctors and scientists came to Medjugorje to study the visionaries and their experiences. The coordinator of the team was Dr. Henri Joyeux, who was a professor in the Faculty of Medicine at Montpellier and a surgeon at Montpellier's Cancer Institute. Dr. Joyeux explains that he and his colleagues heard of the phenomena in Medjugorje by reading the book *La Vierge, apparait-elle a Medjugorje* ("Is the Virgin Mary Appearing at Medjugorje?") by Fr. René Laurentin, the eminent French Mariologist. "We were intrigued by this reading, but not convinced,"[32] Dr. Joyeux admitted. He moved forward,

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can become a suitable vessel for God." See Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili with Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), 110.

[31] Quoted in Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 206-207.

[32] Joyeux and Laurentin, *Etudes scientifiques et médicales*, 67.

however, in contacting Fr. Laurentin to organize an investigative team of scientists to come to study the apparitions. The impression that Dr. Joyeux and his colleagues formed of the visionaries they were able to examine (most, but not all, of the visionaries were present for the testing) is noteworthy, seeing much commonality with Dr. Sanguinetti's observations:

> Vicka, Ivan, Marija, and Jakov are like any other youngsters of their age. We saw no signs of hallucination, pretense or invention. They were calm, serene and deeply serious and did not play at being celebrities. They remained normal in all circumstances in which we observed them. They did not collude with each other either before, during or after the essential event of their day [when they get the chance to experience their apparitions], and they all returned home to their families.
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> These young Yugoslavs are easy to communicate with (even in the case of strangers, a doctor and an engineer); they allow themselves to be photographed or filmed but they do not seek this out; rather, they appeared to be somewhat annoyed by all the fuss that surrounded them. They are country youngsters who do not appear to need either a psychologist or a psychiatrist. They dress in the normal fashion of other young people of their country. They give no impression of being bigoted, each seeming to have his or her own personality; we felt at ease with all of them: they are neither geniuses nor simpletons; they are not being manipulated but remain free and healthy in mind and body.[33]

One of the earliest doctors to examine the visionaries was Dr. Ludvik Stopar, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Maribor and a member of the prestigious International Commission of Doctors. "Dr. Stopar had been permitted to examine the six young seers over a period of weeks during late 1982, conducting a battery of neurological, psychological, intelligence, and personality tests on each of them," Sullivan explains.[34] Although he did not

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[33] René Laurentin and Henry Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies on the Apparitions at Medjugorje*, trans. Luke Griffin (Dublin: Veritas, 1987), 46. Interestingly, the French edition of this work (ibid., Paris: O.E.I.L., 1985) provides a transcription of this paragraph – describing the visionaries – that omits the sentence about the visionaries' dress with an ellipsis; the English translation providing a more complete description. From the French edition: "Ce sont des jeunes de la champagne qui paraissent ne pasavoir besoin ni de psychologue, ni de pschiatre . . . Ils ne donnent pas plus l'impression d'etre bigots, mais semblent avoir chacun leur personnalite; avec chacun d'eux, on se sent tres a l'aise: ni genies, ni simplets, ni manipules mais libres, rayonnant d' une santé solide, et sains de corps et d'espirit," ibid., 66-67. It is noteworthy that in the English edition Laurentin is identified as the first author while in the French edition it is Joyeux; therefore, the order of the authors will be cited here accordingly in relation to which edition is being referenced.

[34] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 152.

provide in-depth details of the examinations, in his final report Dr. Stopar wrote: "Scientific and sociological tests, including (respectively) neuropsychiatric, medico-psychological, somatic, adolescent and young-adult profiles, lifestyle characteristics and intelligence and educational standards, show the children to be *absolutely normal* and free from all psychopathological reactions" (emphasis in original).[35]

Dr. Enzo Gabrici, a neuropsychiatrist who was one of the Italian doctors to examine the visionaries in 1984, similarly concluded: "The subjects are very normal in their ordinary lives (family, school and church). Jakov was somewhat tired after the long ceremony which followed the apparition and went out for a few moments to play with Dr. Frigerio's children. Vicka is an equally normal subject with no traces of neurosis or psychosis."[36] Dr. Gabrici "saw no indication of neurosis or psychosis in any of the other three seers he tested either," Sullivan notes.[37] Furthermore, according to Dr. Gabrici's report:

> Clinical observation has also excluded hallucinatory phenomena as well as the normal components of epilepsy or of any other malfunction capable of producing the alteration of consciousness. There are no symptoms which would suggest that the subjects are living out something which was previously suggested under hypnosis. The visionaries can recall with absolute lucidity what has happened to them.[38]

Although Dr. Gabrici examined Ivan, Jakov, and Marija, he "found Vicka particularly impressive; the girl's ease and spontaneity mitigated strongly against an interpretation of hysteria."[39] He wrote that Vicka "shows no signs of emotional hardship, human misunderstanding or previous traumas. The apparition does not tire her as is the case with

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[35] Quoted in Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at* Medjugorje, 198. For Dr. Stopar's full report see pages 197-199.
[36] Quoted in Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 17.
[37] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 162.
[38] Quoted in Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 17.
[39] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 162.

hysterical trances; on the contrary, she feels more invigorated."[40] Interestingly, Dr. Gabrici even noticed a discernable distinction between the behavior of the visionaries during their apparitions and that of spirit mediums. He explained that the visionaries "are, as it were, rapt, at the moment of the apparition. They differ from mediums who are taken over by a different personality; the visionaries retain perfect consciousness of their identity."[41]

In late 1989 a little-known examination of all six visionaries took place with a team of physicians, psychologists, and sociologists who were brought together by the Vatican in order to study the seers and their experiences. The testing took place in a monastery near Split, and – Sullivan explains – although "no details were released, the French-Canadian priest who headed the Vatican team offered the final paragraph of his report for publication."[42] That final paragraph, like previous reports, highlighted the normalcy, mental stability, and moral integrity of the visionaries, stating: "The conclusion we draw is that the visionaries' behavior patterns, both socio-cultural and socio-religious, do not give the least indication of any tendency to fraud, hysteria or self-deception."[43] This was similar to a conclusion that the 1985 Italian team reached, explaining: "On the basis of the psychological tests, for all and each of the visionaries it is possible with certainty to exclude fraud and deception."[44]

Many years later in 1998, when the collaborative Austrian-Italian team had the chance to examine the visionaries as adults, the psychological testing was extensive[45]and the results, once

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[40] Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 16.
[41] Ibid., 17.
[42] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 242.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Andreas Resch et al., "Commissions and Teams: Research on the Visionaries," *Medugorje*, http://www.medjugorje.hr/en/medjugorje-phenomenon/church/scientific-researches/commissions/, accessed 9 May 2014.
[45] Sullivan explains: "Their specialties ranged from internal medicine, neurology, and gynecology to psychiatry, psychophysiology, and hypnotherapy. The psychological tests alone were smothering in their scope: MMPI, EPI, MHQ, Tree test, Person test, Raven Matrixes, Rorschach, Hand test, and Valsecchi truth detection. Physiological tests that included an electrocardiogram and computerized polygraph were conducted concurrently. Four separate

again, supported the psychological and moral integrity of the visionaries. The scientific team was led by the Austrian psychologist and theologian Dr. Andreas Resch and by the Italian psychiatrist Dr. Giorgio Gagliardi.[46]

In a documentary film recording the 1998 scientific tests on the seers, Dr. Andreas Resch commented openly about his impressions of the visionaries. He was able to interview each visionary with questions about the initial days of the apparitions. About Marija Pavlovic, he has said: "Marija was very open and very profound. I often repeat that it was almost overwhelming. We felt that we were faced with a person who completely faces up to what she is going through and for whom the experience becomes something of an all-encompassing commitment."[47]

About Ivanka Ivankovic, who was the first visionary to see the apparition and who, since then, has become the most reclusive visionary, Dr. Resch said: "My impression was that she is someone who lives a life away from the public, a sensitive woman full of empathy who speaks quite openly about her experience but who today simply wants to be left to live in peace."[48]

Interestingly, Dr. Resch's impression of one of the male visionaries, Ivan Dragicevic, was initially negative but gradually the impression changed. He explained: "At the beginning of Ivan's interview, I feel I had a negative attitude. I had to fight the idea that he wanted to deceive and lie. This is why in the beginning the questioning was rather formal. Then the atmosphere became relaxed. In the end I understood that in Ivan there was such a profound inner depth that I was very impressed, and had to completely review my initial judgment."[49]

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states of consciousness had been tested: waking state, visualization of mental images, hypnotically induced ecstasy, and the raptures of the three seers who still reported daily apparitions." See Sullivan, *op. cit.*, 386.

[46] Paolo Apolito, *The Internet and the Madonna: Religious Visionary Experience on the Web*, trans. Antony Shugaar (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 136.

[47] Michael Mayr, *The Visionaries from Medjugorje: Tried by Science* (Munich: FilmGruppeMunchen, 2004), documentary.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

Regarding his interview with Mirjana Dragicevic, the most educated of the visionaries,[50] Dr. Resch commented: "The interview with Mirjana was probably among the most peculiar. This young woman is very critical and has strong reservation where this kind of interrogation is concerned but she finally agreed to it freely. At first she gave short answers then she expressed herself freely. My first impression was that I was talking to a person who expects a lot from herself, as much as in terms of behavior as what she expresses freely to outsiders. In any case, she spoke openly."[51]

About his interview with Vicka Ivankovic, the most extroverted of the visionaries, Dr. Resch commented: "From the beginning, conversation with Vicka was very free and open. Vicka is very communicative and her memory's exceptionally clear. She told the story [of the beginning of the apparitions] with determination. She didn't respond aggressively to contradiction. For example, when I said that the bishop doesn't approve of this, she simply remarked that that was his own business and that she didn't want to voice any judgment. For her the important thing is what she has experienced and has to accomplish in her life."[52]

Here it is noteworthy to recall Dr. Giorgio Sanguinetti's point, during his 1985 investigation of the seers, wherein he pointed to pathological patterns in "delirious people with a mystical bent," and emphasized that such individuals become extremely resentful and defensive when contradicted or criticized, something that the doctor did not see in the Medjugorje visionaries—similarly to Dr. Resch's latter (1998) encounter with Vicka.[53] Interestingly, Fr. Slavko Barbaric made the same point years earlier. Fr. Barbaric, who was a Franciscan priest and

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[50] Mirjana, who as a teenager used to visit the village of Medjugorje in the summers, was raised in the urban environment of Sarajevo and graduated with a degree in economics from the University of Sarajevo, being the only one of the six visionaries with a college education.
[51] Mayr, *The Visionaries from Medjugorje*, documentary.
[52] Ibid.
[53] For Dr. Sanguinetti's report see, again, Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 206.

a psychologist, was initially sent to Medjugorje in 1982 by the bishop of Mostar to investigate and attempt to expose the apparitions.[54] After conducting his investigations, Fr. Barbaric, to the dismay of Bishop Zanic, became a believer of the integrity of the experiences of the young visionaries and, moreover, became a spiritual director to the visionaries. What impressed him greatly, among other things, he explained, was the fact that the visionaries "do not act like fanatics. These are children, aged ten to sixteen, but when you tell them, 'I do not believe,' they do not attack you, they do not try to convince you, they do not argue with you. Like the postman, they deliver a message and they go home. They do not worry at all about what people expect of them."[55] He continued to emphasize the normalcy of the seers: "Jakov can barely wait to finish school and prayers so he has time to play soccer. These are not people sitting in a corner and waiting for the next apparition, living for the attention it brings them. They are normal children in every way. Even more than if pretending, they would be consumed by this if it was a projection. And these are not children who have a natural gift for such a thing. They are not depressive. They are not children with overactive imaginations. Far from it."[56]

According to Dr. Joyeux's final report, which agrees with the conclusions of Fr. Barbaric and takes them further: "The visionaries have no symptoms of anxiety or obsessional neurosis, phobic or hysterical neurosis, hypochondriac/or psychosomatic neurosis, and there is no indication of any psychosis. We can make these formal statements in the light of detailed clinical examinations."[57]

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[54] Ibid., 160.
[55] Quoted in Sullivan, ibid., 161.
[56] Ibid., 162.
[57] Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 54.

Neuroscientific Studies

Electroencephalogram (EEG) tests were administered on the visionaries, measuring brain waves by indicating the rhythms of brain activity according to eight diagrams which come through electrodes attached to eight parts of the skull, and the results were recorded as taking place before, during, and after the apparitions.[58] The EEG examinations were used to test whether the state that the visionaries experience during their apparitions can be identified, and therefore explained, as a hallucinatory sleep or dream state, or an epileptic state. What is most interesting is that, in neuroscience, states of consciousness are identified through some combination of alpha (receptive) and beta (reactive) impulses. "Dr. Joyeux observed that the ratio of activity in the seers' brains prior to an apparition was exactly normal: ten alpha cycles to twenty beta cycles each second."[59] Falling into a sleep or trance state would decrease the number of alpha cycles while increasing the beta. Yet, the exact opposite happened during apparitions: the visionaries' beta impulses stopped completely, showing them to be in a state that is not simply awake, but *hyper-awake*.[60]

The first visionaries that were tested with the EEGs were Ivan and Marija. What was identified in their brains from the EEG results was the "normal electrical activity associated with wakefulness" and, furthermore, the "examination shows no sign of sleep or of epileptic discharge."[61] Combined with the clinical studies, these results were also able to exclude pathological hallucination. "The electro-encephalogram also excludes epilepsy. Together with the clinical observation (both direct and on video) the test excludes hallucination in the

[58] Ibid., 20.
[59] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 203.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 55.

pathological sense of the word."[62] The French team offered a three-point conclusion summing up the EEG results thus:

1. Ivan Dragicevic and Marija Pavlovic have normal and identical electroencephalograms, before, during and after the period of ecstasy.

2. The electroencephalograms allow us to exclude totally the existence of the phenomena of dreams, sleep or epilepsy, in both subjects, on the day of the tests.

3. Intermittent light simulation during three recordings showed no electrical discharge of an epileptic type before, during or after ecstasy.[63]

Interestingly, the 1998 Italian-Austrian team studied the visionaries by examining four distinct states of consciousness: 1) a waking state; 2) an altered state of consciousness induced by hypnosis; 3) a state of visualization of mental images; and 4) the altered state of consciousness that the visionaries experience during apparitions.[64] The final report explained that the purpose of this testing was to "investigate whether the ecstatic state of the apparition, already registered in 1985 by the Italian doctors working group, still continue to be present or has undergone changes. In addition it was desired to investigate potential coincidence/divergence with other states off [*sic*] consciousness such as guided visualization or hypnosis."[65] The tests ended up demonstrating that during their apparitions the visionaries "entered an altered state of consciousness quite different from the other three mental states in which they were tested."[66] These findings were significant for they were able to show that these other states of consciousness (self-induced hypnosis, guided visualization, or a waking state) could not be used

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[62] Ibid., 20.
[63] Ibid., 64.
[64] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 386.
[65] Andreas Resch et al., "Commissions and Teams: Research on the Visionaries," *Medugorje*, http://www.medjugorje.hr/en/medjugorje-phenomenon/church/scientific-researches/commissions/, accessed 9 May 2014.
[66] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 387.

as alternative, natural explanations for the state that the visionaries experience during their apparitions, as the state that the visionaries entered was proven to be distinctly different. Sullivan explains that to the scientific team and to Vatican officials, who requested the results of the studies, the most interesting conclusion from the 1998 examinations of the visionaries was that the psychiatrists who had examined the seers "were able to induce a hypnotic trance in each instance, but were unsuccessful in producing any visions of the Virgin Mary, despite repeated attempts."[67] This was significant for a couple of reasons; one can be seen in the way that the attempt at producing visions of the Virgin Mary were orchestrated. For example, at one point the visionary Marija, who is one of the three visionaries who claims to continue experiencing daily apparitions, was hypnotized for 28 minutes. Under hypnosis she was asked by Dr. Gagliardi to re-experience an apparition. "The Virgin Mary is now appearing to you," suggested Dr. Gagliardi. "You will soon be able to see her face, as you have seen it so often."[68] These kinds of guided visualizations under hypnosis were not able to produce, or perhaps more aptly *reproduce*, the kind of altered state of consciousness that the visionaries encounter during their apparitions.

"The aim of the hypnosis was to determine whether or not the apparition, linked with the ecstasy, can be provoked by suggestion and therefore dismissed as self-suggestion and imagination. This would've led to labeling the visionaries as simulators. However, if the ecstasy cannot be provoked by hypnosis then the apparition, the ecstasy, cannot be passed off as self-hypnosis, self-suggestion, or imagination."[69] Computerized polygraphs—examining "skin electrical activity; peripheral cardiac capillary and heartbeat activities; skeletal and diaphragmatic pneumography"[70]—were applied to measure the interior state that the visionaries

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[67] Ibid.
[68] Mayr, *The Visionaries from Medjugorje*.
[69] Ibid. Quotation provided by documentary narrator (unnamed).
[70] Resch et al, "Commissions and Teams," *Medugorje.*

entered during hypnosis and during their apparitional experiences to make the comparison between the states.

Dr. Mario Cigada, an Italian specialist on hypnosis who was a psychotherapist and oculist on the 1998 team, explained the results. He emphasized that the results for both Marija and Ivan were nearly identical, and therefore (when interviewed) he used the results of Marija's tests to articulate what both visionaries were experiencing. "These are the results of the research made in 1998 on Marija and Ivan. The differences between hypnosis and ecstasy, which we demonstrated, have been exposed," Dr. Cigada explained.[71] In this regard, electrical activity on the surface of the visionaries' skin was recorded "in order to gain information about the functionality of the neurovegetative system and the state of awareness of the visionary."[72]

Dr. Cigada explained that a vegetative nervous system is split into two parts, the sympathetic system and the para-sympathetic system. During Marija's apparition, the sympathetic nervous system was active and her heart activity went up to 135 beats. Under hypnosis, however, "where we suggest that she recall previous ecstasies [previous apparition experiences through visualization], the graph shows the highest peak of activity in a totally different place," the para-sympathetic nervous system; this system (unlike the sympathetic) is characterized by relaxation, and the heart-rate, therefore, slowed down to 70 beats per minute. According to Dr. Cigada this "shows that there is a radical difference between the state of hypnosis and ecstasy."[73]

These findings were instrumental as they were able to show that hypnosis and guided visualization were not able to reproduce the same state of consciousness that the visionaries

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[71] Quoted in Mayr, *The Visionaries from Medjugorje*.
[72] Apolito, *Internet and the Madonna,* 136.
[73] Quoted in Mayr, *The Visionaries from Medjugorje*.

experience during their apparitions, in fact pointing to a completely different state in the distinctions that were recorded. The results, thus, were able to demonstrate that hypnosis (and thus self-suggestion), visualization, and imagination were not responsible for the apparitional experiences of the visionaries. This came alongside the findings of the EEG tests, which showed that pathological hallucination, an epileptic state, a sleep or a dream state, also were not responsible for the experiences of the visionaries.

Studies on Ocular and Visual Functions

Dr. Jacques Philippot, an ophthalmologist on the French team, undertook the study of ocular and visual functions on the visionaries, examining the back of their eyes, photomotor and blinking reflexes, the frequency of blinking before, during, and after ecstasy, conducting screening tests, and studying the mobility of the eyeballs by using electro-oculographic recordings before, during, and after their apparitions.[74] The examinations on the back of the visionaries' eyes "were normal and were identical before and after the ecstasy."[75] These tests excluded any "organic anomaly (either ocular or cerebral, whether due to swelling or not)" and, furthermore, they excluded the possibility of visual hallucination since the "ocular system is anatomically and functionally normal."[76]

The reflex of blinking, interestingly, was absent from the eyes during their apparitions when extremely strong lights were flashed in front of the visionaries, having no effect on them. And yet reflexive blinking was present both before and after ecstasy in the face of dazzling lights.[77] "Examination of the inner eye indicated a normal state, identical before and after ecstasy. The pupils contracted normally in the presence of light, but it was noted that while

[74] Philippot's studies recorded in Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 64-66.
[75] Ibid., 64.
[76] Ibid., 65.
[77] Ibid., 64.

Marija and Ivanka blinked in the bright light before and after the apparition, during it they did not blink even once."[78] This was the same result that the 1985 Italian team would reach a year later, as during apparitions "a 100-watt bulb shone full in their [the visionaries'] faces [but] produced no ocular reaction."[79] Moreover, during apparitions the number of eyelid movements – thus blinking – was significantly less than what was observable before and after an apparition. Two of the visionaries had no eyelid movement whatsoever during apparitions when examined by the French team.[80] These results agreed with earlier tests which were performed by Dr. M. Frederica Magatti, a member of an earlier 1984 Italian team.[81] Dr. Magatti tried "shouting at, jabbing, and pinching the seers during an apparition, without obtaining 'any observable reaction.'"[82]

> Finally, after noting that the eyes of each child had become "hugely dilated" during their apparition, Dr. Magatti used a film projector with a 1,000-watt bulb to blast their pupils with light. None of the five[83] had reacted, Dr. Magatti wrote; not only did their pupils remain unusually dilated, but the eyelids of each seer continued to blink at a normal rate. Her tests were preliminary, Dr. Magatti noted; nevertheless, she was prepared to assert that the Medjugorje visionaries, during their apparitions, were demonstrating the most complete "suspension of consciousness of their relationship with the exterior world" she had ever observed in a subject.[84]

Furthermore, according to the electro-oculogram tests, as the apparitions began the eyeballs of the visionaries become immobile, their eye movements "ceasing simultaneously almost to the second."[85] This graphic recording of the uncanny synchronization in the simultaneous

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[78]Craig, *Spark from Heaven*, 138.
[79] Ibid., 140.
[80] Laurentin and Joyeux, 64. Both Ivan Dragicevic and Vicka Ivankovic, ages 19 and 20 during the experiments, experienced no eyelid movements during their apparitions. Dragicevic's experience was recorded on October 7, 1984, while Ivankovic's was recorded a day earlier on October 6, 1984.
[81] In distinction from the 1985 Italian team, who conducted more in-depth studies.
[82] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 163.
[83] Mirjana, the sixth visionary, was absent during the examinations, residing with her family as a teenager in Sarajevo.
[84] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 163.
[85] Laurentin and Joyeux , *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 65.

movements of the eyeballs "indicates simultaneity to the second in cessation of movement at the beginning of the ecstasy and, again, simultaneity to the second in the return of movement at the end of the ecstasy."[86] Dr. Philippot would notice that, actually, at "the beginning of the ecstasy there is a simultaneity to *one-fifth of a second* in the cessation of eyeball movement which begins again simultaneously at the end of the ecstasy."[87] Such synchronism, for Dr. Philippot, "was so far beyond the capacity of normal human functioning that no form of collusion or manipulation could account for it."[88]

Video recordings, photographs, and firsthand examination by the French team further showed that during apparitions the visionaries' eyes converge on the same point, a spot a few feet above their heads where they report to see the Madonna.[89] "For anyone who has seen the ecstasy or a photograph of it, it is evident that the visionaries look intently at the same object. On all levels, (visual, auditory, tactile) they relate in such a coherent manner to this same object that it seems impossible to explain the fact through a pre-established harmony of their subjective dispositions."[90] However, when an opaque screen was placed in front of the visionaries' eyes to test whether the experiment would interfere with, or disrupt, their apparitions, it had no effect on them or their visionary experiences. This has led to questions surrounding the nature of their experiences, asking whether the experiences of the visionaries can be categorized as objective or subjective, or perhaps as an admixture containing both components, a matter we will discuss in greater detail shortly hereafter.

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[86] Ibid., 65.
[87] Ibid., 66, emphasis mine.
[88] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 202-203.
[89] Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 35.
[90] Ibid.

Studies on Auditory & Voice Functions,
and Sensitivity to Pain

Dr. Francois Rouquerol, a member of the 1984 French team, conducted tests measuring the auditory functions of the visionaries in order to determine whether an auditory hallucination is taking place. Dr. Rouquerol concluded that during apparitions there is an absence of normal objective clinical reactions to the presence of violent noise. In other words, when a 90 decibel sound—the "equivalent to the noise of a combustion engine at high speed"—was fed into the right ear of visionary Ivan Dragicevic during an apparition the visionary did not convey a single reaction to the noise, as if being oblivious to it. "At the end of the ecstasy Ivan confirmed that he heard nothing."[91] This was a great contrast to his pre-ecstasy reaction, wherein the injection of a lesser, 70 decibel sound, visibly startled the young visionary. "The boy jumped, as was to be expected, when exposed to a seventy-decibel noise. During the ecstasy, however, although the sound was conducted along the auditory passages in the same way, Ivan did not react to a ninety-decibel noise, and afterwards said he had heard nothing at all. It would appear that, at this time, the sound had not reached the cortex of the brain."[92]

In addition to concluding that there is a clear disconnection of auditory pathways during the apparitions, making the visionaries as impervious to exterior noise as they are to strong blasts of light, in "the same way [it was determined that] the visionaries do not feel pinching, prodding or other interventions," thus being impervious to pain as well.[93] These findings on the visionaries, their imperviousness to pain during apparitions, were confirmed by the 1985 Italian team as well. One of the doctors[94] on the Italian team used an algometer, "an electric instrument

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[91] Rouquerol's studies recorded in Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific & Medical Studies*, 70.
[92] Craig, *Spark from Heaven*, 138.
[93] Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 27.
[94] There is some ambiguity as to what is the name of the doctor who performed this test, given (slightly) contradictory reports from sources. Craig identifies him simply as "Professor Santini" while Sullivan identifies him

for measuring resistance to burns,"[95] to test the visionaries' sensitivity to pain. The test showed that "prior to the apparitional experience their reaction to pain was normal (between 0.3 to 0.4 seconds), [yet] during the apparition they did not perceive any pain."[96] Mary Craig provides details behind the test, explaining:

> When a heated silver disc was applied to Marija and two of the other visionaries before ecstasy, they reacted within three or four tenths of a second – in other words, normally. During ecstasy, however, they did not react at all. The test was limited to seven seconds, for fear of inflicting serious burns if the period was extended. During that time, the visionaries appeared to be completely insensitive to pain.[97]

The doctor who performed the experiment wrote that this proved without a doubt that the visionaries were not faking their experiences or trying to deceive.[98] Dr. Luigi Frigerio, another member of the Italian team, explained that these results combined with the EEG testing, which determined that the visionaries were not only awake but hyper-awake during their apparitions, presented a contradiction that "cannot be explained naturally, and thus can be only preternatural or supernatural."[99] In other words, in a state of hyper-wakefulness a person would be very sensitive and vulnerable to pain, unlike the naturally unexplainable paradox that encapsulates the state of consciousness that the visionaries enter into.

Dr. Rouquerol's results additionally showed that the "auditory potential test, which studies the nervous influx from the periphery (the cochlea, part of the inner ear) to the core of the

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as "Dr. Michael Sabatini"; Nolan, as Craig, reports "Professor Santini" while James Paul Pandarakalam identifies him as "Dott Santini." Sullivan writes of "Dr. Michael Sabatini" as "a psychopharmocologist fresh from the faculty of Columbia University, where he had spent years studying the 'problem of pain.'" Nolan's report corroborates this content, though differing in the provided name, listing "Professor Santini" as a "neuro-psycho-pharmacologist, who for many years has studied the problem of pain at the Columbia University of New York. . . ." See Craig, *Spark from Heaven*, 140; Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 204; Denis Nolan, *Medjugorje: A Time for Truth, a Time for Action* (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Publishing, 1993), 143; James Paul Pandarakalam, "Are the Apparitions of Medjugorje Real?" *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2001, 231.

[95] Craig, *Spark from Heaven*, 140.

[96] Pandarakalam, "Apparitions of Medjugorje Real?" 232.

[97] Craig, *Spark from Heaven*, 140.

[98] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 204.

[99] Quoted in Sullivan, ibid., 204.

cerebral artery, indicates that the various pathways to the brain are normal. The regular and rounded shape of the graph eliminates auditory hallucination of an epileptic type."[100] Thus, in addition to the EEG examinations, these tests provided further evidence against an epileptic diagnosis in explaining the apparitions, in addition to eliminating auditory hallucination as an explanation.

Dr. Rouquerol also conducted voice function (phonation) experiments on the visionaries. It is important to note that during their apparitions the visionaries' voices become inaudible while their lips continue moving as if in conversation with someone. This is one of the key synchronisms experienced by the seers during their apparitions. As the apparition begins, first the visionaries fall to their knees and their voices immediately and simultaneously become silent without even a split second of distinction. Interestingly, the "visionaries themselves have admitted to hearing their own voices of verbal communication as normal during the apparitional experience and are surprised that others cannot hear them."[101] Dr. Rouquerol's tests showed that during apparitions, while the lips and facial muscles of the visionaries are mobile, the larynx (where the vocal cords are present) stops. This means that while their lips are moving normally, as in communication, the act of exhaling does not vibrate the vocal cords, presenting another inexplicable paradox. Moreover, the movement of the lips, and thus the muscles controlling gesticulation on the face, provide "a further argument against catalepsy" since a cataleptic state would constitute a condition wherein rigidity and immobility of the muscles are present.[102] Dr. Rouquerol explained the results on voice and larynx functions in five points, enunciating:

1. While the visionaries recited the Rosary before the apparition the needle indicating the functioning of the larynx muscles displayed ample movement.

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[100] Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 70.
[101] Pandarakalam, "Apparitions of Medjugorje Real?" 234.
[102] Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 71, 75.

2. At the beginning of the ecstasy, when the voice became inaudible, the needle stopped. There was no longer any movement of the larynx. When the visionary conversed with the apparition there was movement of the lips only (articulation without phonation).

3. The needle moved again. This time the voices returned in the middle of the apparition to recite the Our Father which, according to the visionaries, had been started by the Virgin.

4. The voice disappeared in the final phase of the ecstasy as it did in the first phase (articulation without phonation).

5. The movements of the larynx reappeared at the end of the ecstasy as soon as the visionaries began to speak.

> This shows that the extinction of the voice at the beginning of the ecstasy is connected with the fact that there was no movement of the larynx and, though lip movement remained normal, the act of breathing out no longer caused the vocal cords to vibrate.[103]

Another important connection has been made between the first word that is uttered by the visionaries once their voices return the moment their apparition ends and the simultaneous eyeball movements of the visionaries that also return. Here it is important to note that at the end of each apparition "one visionary, or more, utter more or less simultaneously the word 'Ode,' which [in Croatian] means 'she is gone'."[104] Craig explains the connection:

> The French professor, [Jean] Cadilhac, who later conducted psychological and psychiatric tests on the children, attached great importance to the fact that the word *ode* was uttered (by one or more of the visionaries) *after* they had lowered their eyes. Had they spoken first, the word could have been interpreted as a pre-arranged signal. Moreover, *ode* was not always synchronized. Out of fifty apparitions studied by the French team, Jakov came in first with it fourteen times, Vicka eight, Marija four, and Ivanka only three.[105]

Subjective or Objective Experiences?

What does it mean to ask whether the experiences of the visionaries are subjective or objective? It is a question that has come up often in the writings of both scholars and journalists

[103] Ibid., 26.
[104] Pandarakalam, "Apparitions of Medjugorje Real?" 235.
[105] Craig, *Spark from Heaven*, 134.

in regard to the Medjugorje visionaries.[106] The vocabulary of mystical theology which we examined in the first chapter regarding visions provides an appropriate means of explanation for this question. Essentially, the question of subjective or objective experience is asking whether the visionary experience possesses the characteristics of an imaginative or a corporal vision. The latter, the corporal vision, would constitute an "objective" experience as it points to the presence of a three-dimensional entity (the alleged apparition) that is externally perceivable by each visionary, thus objectively experienced as the phenomenon is perceived *in the same way* by the external senses of each seer. The former, the imaginative vision, would constitute a "subjective" experience as it points to the presence of an entity that is perceivable through the "inner senses" of each visionary, being filtered and manifested through the inner, imaginative faculties of each, individual seer, independent of the other seers. In such a case, each visionary may have a subjectively experienced encounter whose content, although (possibly) similar, can possess different characteristics.

Interestingly, in the case of Medjugorje, the answer does not seem entirely black-or-white, as the experiences of the visionaries signify the presence of both subjective and objective elements, even to the point of paradox. James Paul Pandarakalam, a psychologist who examined the visionaries on various occasions, explains: "Medical tests with Medjugorje visionaries at the time of the apparitional occurrence point toward an objective and subjective or nonobjective visionary experience."[107] There are two pieces of evidence from the medical tests that point to a subjective experience. "The screening test does not impair the vision; therefore, the normal visual pathways are not used, and the evoked auditory potential tests proves [*sic*] that during the

[106] See Pandarakalam, "Apparitions of Medjugorje Real?" 232-233; Joyeux and Laurentin, *Etudes scientifiques et médicales*, 47; Craig, *Spark from Heaven*, 139.
[107] Ibid., cited in Pandarakalam, 232.

apparitional experience the auditory pathways remain normal but are not used."[108] In other words, both of these tests point to the presence of an inner experience, one whose manifestation is not altered or disturbed by exterior factors such as blocking the view of the visionaries with a screen or attempting to affect their hearing with loud noises. These experiments point to the reality that the apparition is filtered and manifested through the imaginative faculties (not externally) and that this may be an imaginative—in other words, subjective—experience that the visionaries are undergoing.

Other evidence, however, points to the opposite conclusion, signifying the presence of a corporal vision, or an objective experience, in the apparitional encounter of the visionaries. René Laurentin stresses three pieces of evidence which point to an objective experience. First, what is significant during the apparition is the convergence of the gaze of the visionaries' eyes that is directed toward a spot above their heads, as if all were perceiving a nonvisible entity that is externally (and thus objectively) present. Second, the electro-oculograph testing showing simultaneity of the cessation of eyeball movements also points to an objective experience, as it shows that the visionaries are experiencing the same phenomenon at the same moment instead of having intersubjective or personal experiences. Third, Laurentin points to the "simultaneous raising of their eyes and hands as the apparition disappears upwards" as a final sign of objectivity, again evidence that signifies behavior that responds to an external (and, therefore, corporal, or objective) vision.[109]

Of course, an apparent paradox is present in the evidence here as elements of both the subjective and the objective are observable, presenting an admixture of characteristics behind the experience which are not easy to categorize into one definition. Therefore, on the matter of

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[108] Ibid.
[109] As cited in ibid.

subjective or objective experiences, the French team concluded by emphasizing the apparent ambiguity, or mysteriousness, of the case: that this "is an essential question which the tests do not answer with certainty."[110] However, their report further postulated that if "the vision is objective, and the above points [referring to the three points that signify objectivity] would seem to indicate this, the modalities of the vision are not those of ordinary perception; they belong to another mode of perception, itself objective, but not measurable by our tests (which nevertheless do not exclude it)."[111]

The point here, interestingly, can be seen in comparison to what was previously said about Kant's epistemological framework and mystical experiences in Perovich's essay. Perovich stressed that Kant would consider his epistemological model to be inadequate in analyzing mystical experiences as the Kantian epistemology was intended for, and therefore limited to, normal human perception. Mystical perception, on the other hand, transcending normal human cognition, could not be measurable, and therefore subjected to, the Kantian epistemological framework. This is similar (though not identical) to what the French team is conveying about the experiences of the Medjugorje visionaries. The experiences indicate a mode of perception that is not ordinary and whose essence is not measurable by their scientific tests. Important distinctions, however, need to be made here, as the foregoing point could be too easily misinterpreted. What the scientific team is saying essentially comes down to an *epistemological* issue: that the *mode of perception*, and *not* the psychological and neurophysiological mechanisms, of the experiences cannot be determined by their scientific examinations. In other words, there was a lot that could be measured and *was* indeed determined by the scientific testing, primarily the negative criteria of distinguishing what the visionaries are *not* experiencing – through the various pathological

[110] Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 72.
[111] Ibid.

symptoms and theories of fraud that were excluded as untenable alternative explanations by the scientific examinations. Once again, the issue was the mode of perception, the question of how the visionaries are able to experience their encounter in a way that transcends standard subjective-objective dichotomies of perception which are essential to normal human cognition.

The Results

The final results of the various scientific teams that examined the visionaries highly corresponded with one another's findings. Let us begin with the final report of the 1984 French team written by Dr. Henri Joyeux. It states:

> The phenomenon of the apparition in Medjugorje, which was studied during five periods of 1984 with five visionaries as subjects, is scientifically inexplicable. Clinical observation of the visionaries leads us to affirm, as our Yugoslav colleagues have already affirmed, that these young people are healthy in mind and body.
>
> Detailed clinical and paraclincial studies completed before, during, and after the ecstasies of 24-25 March, 9-10 June, 6-7 October, and 28-29 December allow us to affirm scientifically that there is no pathological modification of the parameters studied: electro-encephalogram, electrocardiogram, evoked auditory potentials.
>
> - There is no epilepsy, as electro-encephalograms demonstrate.
> - They are not asleep, again the electro-encephalograms demonstrate this.
> - There is no question of any hallucination in the pathological sense of that word:
> - There is no auditory or visual hallucination that would be linked to the peripheral auditory or visual receptors (normal visual and auditory pathways).
> - There is no paroxystic hallucination: the electro-encephalograms demonstrate this.
> - There are no hallucinations that would have their origins in dream such as one would observe in cases of extreme mental disorder or in the course of the development of atrophic dementia.
> - There is no question of catalepsy, because, during the ecstasy the muscles controlling gesticulation are not inhibited and function normally.[112]

[112] Laurentin and Joyeux, *op. cit*., 74-75.

Given all the examinations and their results, the final report of the French team would conclude that the visionaries' regular "behavior is always non-pathological," emphasizing that the seers do not possess any symptoms of anxiety, neurosis, or hysteria, and that the "ecstasies are not pathological nor is there any element of deceit. No scientific discipline seems able to describe these phenomena."[113]

Interestingly, the 1985 Italian team reached similar results, although their final report, issued as a 12-point conclusion, highlighted not only the medical and psychological findings but also observations about the visionaries' growth in virtue due to their apparitions, as well as making numerous theological claims about the nature of the experiences. The report stated:

1. On the basis of the psychological tests, for all and each of the visionaries it is possible with certainty to exclude fraud and deception.

2. On the basis of the medical examinations, tests and clinical observations etc., for all and each of the visionaries it is possible to exclude pathological hallucinations.

3. On the basis of the results of previous researches for all and each of the visionaries it is possible to exclude a purely natural interpretation of these manifestations.

4. On the basis of information and observations that can be documented, for all and each of the visionaries it is possible to exclude that these manifestations are of the preternatural order i.e. under demonic influence.

5. On the basis of information and observations that can be documented, there is a correspondence between these manifestations and those that are usually described in mystical theology.

6. On the basis of information and observations that can be documented, it is possible to speak of spiritual advances in the theological and moral virtues of the visionaries, from the beginning of these manifestations until today.

7. On the basis of information and observations that can be documented, it is possible to exclude teaching or behavior of the visionaries that would be in clear contradiction to Christian faith and morals.

[113] Ibid., 75.

8. On the basis of information and observations that can be documented, it is possible to speak of good spiritual fruits in people drawn into the supernatural activity of these manifestations and in people favorable to them.

9. After more than four years, the tendencies and different movements that have been generated through Medjugorje, in consequence of these manifestations, influence the people of God in the Church in complete harmony with Christian doctrine and morals.

10. After more than four years, it is possible to speak of permanent and objective spiritual fruits of movements generated through Medjugorje.

11. It is possible to affirm that all good and spiritual undertakings of the Church, which are in complete harmony with the authentic magisterium of the Church, find support in the events in Medjugorje.

12. Accordingly, one can conclude that after a deeper examination of the protagonists, facts, and their effects, not only in the local framework, but also in regard to the responsive chords of the Church in general, it is well for the Church to recognize the supernatural origin and, thereby, the purpose of the events in Medjugorje.[114]

The Italian anthropologist Paolo Apolito has been critical of certain conclusions that the Italian team reached about the experiences of the visionaries. Although he acknowledged that the team was "carrying out serious and reliable investigations and tests,"[115] Apolito was critical of two aspects of the results which provided a "theological analysis" and a "scientific and theological judgment" about the apparitions.[116] Apolito's criticisms, when considering the 12-point conclusion above, are not without merit, as Apolito voiced reservations about the way that matters of scientific empiricism were intertwined in the results with matters of faith and theological speculation.[117]

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[114] Resch et al., "Commissions and Teams."
[115] Apolito, *Internet and the Madonna*, 137.
[116] Ibid., 137. For a more in-depth account of the theological grounding that the Italian team incorporated in its results, see Marco Margnelli and Gorgio Gagliardi, *Le apparizioni della Madonna: da Lourdes a Medjugorje* (Edizioni Riza, 1987).
[117] Ibid., Apolito, *op. cit.*, 137.

It is, in fact, not difficult to see when considering the 12-point conclusion that the first couple points, which speak to psychological and medical tests that determined the absence of pathological hallucinations as well as fraud and deception in the experiences, belong to the area of science, while other points, which speak to "the supernatural activity of these manifestations" (point 8) or their "supernatural origin" (point 12), belong to the area of faith and theological speculation. The distinction is important to recognize and, therefore, Apolito's criticism is substantial. However, it is also important to recognize that the investigative team was made up of "seventeen renowned natural scientists, doctors, psychiatrists and theologians. . . ."[118] Theologians can, in their competence, make theological judgments about alleged mystical phenomena, judgments that scientists, doctors, or psychiatrists would not be able to make professionally because it is out of the purview of their fields of expertise. Yet again, it is also important to note that the authenticity, or lack thereof, of the purported apparitions of Medjugorje will not necessarily come through a theological judgment but an *ecclesial* decision. In other words, it is up to the Church, and not individual theologians, to make the statement that the apparitions are, or are not, of supernatural origin. The Church does take into consideration the findings of both scientists and theologians in making a decision on such matters, but can also disregard the conclusions of scientists and theologians, as it is ultimately an ecclesial decision when it comes.

The belief that the Virgin Mary is appearing to the visionaries of Medjugorje in the form of supernatural apparitions does require (and, therefore, constitutes) an act of faith. The scientific studies cannot *prove* this reality. They can, at best, help strengthen the visionaries' claims, and personal integrity, by excluding other, alternative, natural or pathological explanations for the

[118] Resch et al., "Commissions and Teams."

phenomena but, once again, they cannot show that the spiritual and theological content of the visionaries' experiences are true. Believing in the veracity of their claims still constitutes an act of faith. For our purposes here, however, we are not considering the question of whether the visionaries are experiencing authentic supernatural apparitions of the Virgin Mary but, more exclusively, what is being considered is what the scientific studies on their experiences can show us about discourses surrounding extraordinary religious and mystical experiences: constituting a separate, albeit related, focus of concentration.

The 1998 Austrian-Italian team also concluded in their final report that the visionaries—tested by them as adults, this time—"do not exhibit any kind of pathological symptoms" while admitting, however, that they did exhibit "symptoms that are related to justified stress that occurs through very high levels of exogenous and endogenous stimulation as a consequence of everyday life."[119] Furthermore, the report continued: "From their personal testimonies it follows that the initial and subsequent altered state of consciousness occurs due to their unusual experiences which they themselves recognize and define and still continuously recognize as a vision/apparition of Our Lady."[120] Psychophysical investigations were carried out on the four distinct states of consciousness that were previously mentioned: a waking state, a state of hypnosis, a state of visualization of mental images, and an apparition state. The conclusion reached was that during their apparitions the visionaries entered an altered state of consciousness that was different from the other (tested) states, excluding the possibility of self-suggestion, imagination, or hypnotic simulation for their experiences.[121] "The hypnotically induced state of ecstasy did not cause the phenomenology of spontaneous experiences and therefore it can be

[119] Resch et al., "Commissions and Teams."
[120] Ibid.
[121] Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 387.

deduced that the ecstatic states of spontaneous apparitions were not states of hypnotic trance," the final report concluded.[122]

At the request of the Vatican, one of the most recent set of scientific examinations on the visionaries was performed on June 25, 2005, commemorating the 24th anniversary of the apparitions. Agreeing to the Holy See's request to be examined were the visionaries Marija Pavlovic and Ivan Dragicevic, two of the three Medjugorje seers who still report to receive daily apparitions. The investigation was led by Dr. Henri Joyeux, the physician who conducted tests on the visionaries two decades earlier with his French team. In a report send to Pope Benedict XVI, Dr. Joyeux concluded that twenty years later the conclusions were still the same.[123]

Summary

Since June 1981, when six Croatian youngsters began to report daily apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Medjugorje, the subject of the apparitions has become a popular, albeit controversial, topic in the Catholic Church: attracting both influential supporters and critics within the hierarchy of the Church. The most influential supporter of Medjugorje was the late pope (and recent saint) John Paul II. The heart of the criticism toward the events in Medjugorje has, on the other hand, come from the local bishop of Mostar, Pavao Zanic, as well as his successor Ratko Peric. Under John Paul II's papacy, Zanic was removed from responsibility in investigating Medjugorje, and the task was handed over to the Yugoslav Bishops Conference. Due to the outbreak of war in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, however, the Yugoslav Bishops were not able to finish their work in investigating Medjugorje, releasing an early statement – known as the "Zadar Declaration" – wherein they acknowledged that supernatural events have yet to be proven in Medjugorje, although admitting that future investigations will

[122] Resch et al., "Commissions and Teams."
[123] Cited in Nolan, *Medjugorje and the Church*, 4.

need to examine the entire event. Those future investigations were announced nearly two decades later in March 2010 under Pope Benedict XVI's papacy, when the Holy See established an international Vatican Commission under the direction of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to examine the apparitions in Medjugorje. This was an unprecedented move, as Medjugorje became the first Marian apparition site in the history of the Church to be directly investigated by an international Vatican Commission, the highest ecclesial body to investigate such a case, being taken away from the lower jurisdictions of the local bishop and a national conference of bishops. As of this writing, the Church has yet to announce a public decision on the authenticity, or lack thereof, of the experiences of the visionaries.

Due to its unique circumstances, the case of Medjugorje has also set a precedent on a scientific level, in addition to the ecclesial. Occurring on a daily basis, and in the technologically-advanced age of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the apparitions of the visionaries have been subjected to an immense amount of multidimensional scientific examination *while transpiring*, an unprecedented occurrence in the history of Marian apparition cases. French, Italian, and Austrian teams have conducted major studies on the visionaries and their experiences since the apparitions began; smaller-scale investigations have also been conducted by other, both local and international, doctors. The various studies were able to eliminate a number of alternative, natural and pathological, explanations for the apparitions while showing also that the visionaries are experiencing a scientifically inexplicable phenomenon in the profound altered state of consciousness they experience during their apparitions. The pragmatic, Jamesian method of approaching religious experiences with empirical studies while leaving the possibility open that something "more" may be in play is highly present in this case.

Although all major teams that conducted scientific investigations on the visionaries have conducted serious studies, the 1985 Italian team has been criticized for combining the scientific data with theological claims and speculations about the nature of the apparitions. Having theologians on their team, in addition to the various doctors and scientists, the Italian team did possess individuals with the training to make theological statements; however, those statements would still hold little value in deciding the authenticity of the apparitions, as that judgment – when it comes – is essentially an ecclesial one, having to come from the authority of the Church. Additionally, the claim that the Virgin Mary is appearing in Medjugorje is, at its core, a statement of faith, not a scientific statement. Science can show what the visionaries *are not experiencing*, eliminating various alternative explanations for the phenomena, but science cannot show that the theological content of the visionaries' claims is true. Believing that the visionaries of Medjugorje are receiving authentic apparitions of the Virgin Mary requires (and, therefore, constitutes) an act of faith. The scientific studies can, at best, help support the possibility by eliminating other explanations for the apparitions but the scientific studies cannot prove the possibility. The question of whether the experiences of the visionaries are subjective or objective, or a combination of the two that transcends normal modes of perception (a hypothesis proposed by the 1984 French team), also remains open, as the experiences possess an admixture of qualities that include components of both subjective and objective experiences. Having, however, observed the various scientific studies on the visionaries and their results, let us now consider what, if any, contributions can be made with this information to discourses on religious experiences.

Chapter 4
Medjugorje's Uniqueness:
A Different Case Study for Neuroscience

There have been scholars who have studied the relationship between neuroscience and religious experiences. However, what distinguishes the case of Medjugorje is how rare the particular religious experiences that the visionaries report are. Such experiences have yet to be subjected to similar in-depth scientific study before Medjugorje.

It is an apparent fact that few religion scholars (and this includes scholars of religious experience) are familiar with the scientific examinations on the Medjugorje visionaries. For example, in a 2008 article on EEG activity in Carmelite nuns, Mario Beauregard and Vincent Paquette write that to "date, no electroencephalography (EEG) study has been conducted to identify the neuroelectrical correlates of a mystical experience," although admitting that several EEG studies have been performed on deep meditation and absorption states.[1] Yet, the experiences of the Medjugorje seers are better identified as the former (thus, "mystical") rather than put in the latter ("meditative" or "absorptive") categories of religious experience, as the visionary experiences pertain to a type of experience identified in mystical theology. Granted that, as Beauregard and Paquette might not recognize or appreciate the unique quality of the Medjugorje experiences, to say that to date EEG studies have been conducted *only* on meditative or absorptive experiences is to ignore the important studies performed on the Medjugorje visionaries; although in this case, as in similar cases,[2] the issue does not seem to indicate any

[1]Mario Beauregard and Vincent Paquette "EEG Activity in Carmelite Nuns during a Mystical Experience." *Neuroscience Letters* 444 (2008), 1.
[2] We will see the same reality below in the work of Michael P. Carroll and Richard Dawkins.

dishonesty in scholarship on the part of the authors but simply ignorance of the fact that these studies have been performed in Medjugorje.[3]

Another issue arises. A similar claim from Sidney Callahan mentioned in the previous chapter is that in "the twentieth century, scientific investigations using new brain imaging techniques have begun to explore altered states of consciousness, starting with sleep and dreaming and going on to studies of meditating adepts."[4] There has been a prevalent trend in scholarship on neuroscience and religious experiences or altered states of consciousness, where most often it is simpler, cultivated experiences that are examined for the reason that they are more common than extraordinary or unique experiences (like apparitions) and, therefore, they are easier to "produce" and study. This reality, however, has led to the study of "religious experiences" which, under closer scrutiny, appear to be less than religious experiences. Let us consider two examples.

While Beauregard and Paquette titled their 2008 article "EEG Activity in Carmelite Nuns during a Mystical Experience," from their methodology it becomes evident that what the authors were actually examining in a group of Carmelite nuns was far from a "mystical experience." The authors measured EEG activity inside "a dark, soundproof room (isolated acoustically and electromagnetically) during a Mystical condition, a Control condition, and a Baseline condition," they explain.[5] The experiments always began with a baseline condition, which was understood as a normal, restful state lasting five minutes in which the nuns were asked to have their eyes

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[3] Beauregard and Paquette reference various studies on neuroscience and religious experiences in their sources without any mention of the studies in Medjugorje, indicating a lack of knowledge of the Medjugorje studies. A major reason for this—as it is not an isolated incident of scholarly ignorance toward the Medjugorje studies—may be that when René Laurentin published the initial findings of the scientific studies on the visionaries he did so in the Catholic press, thus using a religious press as opposed to an academic press, which scholars would be more likely to read.

[4] Callahan, *Women Who Hear Voices*, 12

[5] Beauregard and Paquette, "EEG Activity in Carmelite Nuns," 2.

closed. During the control condition, "subjects were instructed to remember and relive (eyes closed) the most intense state of union with another human ever felt in their lives as a member of the Carmelite Order."[6] And finally, during the mystical condition, "subjects were asked to remember and relive (eyes closed) the most intense mystical experience ever felt in their lives as a member of the Carmelite Order. This strategy was adopted given that the nuns told us before the onset of the study that 'God can't be summoned at will.'"[7] And herein lies the problem: the fact that the authors were not able to study the EEG activity of an actual mystical experience in Carmelite nuns, as the title of their article misleadingly suggests, but that they were, on the other hand, studying the EEG activity of *mental reenactment* that uses imagination, memory, and self-suggestion to try to reproduce the state of a "mystical condition"—as if such a state was voluntarily reproducible, disregarding the gifted nature of such experiences.

Yet, as we saw in the studies on the Medjugorje visionaries, when psychiatrists tried to hypnotize the seers and lead them, through a process of visualization and imagination, to relive their apparitional experience, attempting to reproduce it, the state of consciousness that they entered was entirely different from their apparitional state. Thus, the authors provide no proof that the "mystical condition" that the Carmelite nuns were asked to relive and reproduce can be the same state (or even similar) to the one that the nuns experienced individually when they did undergo intense religious or mystical experiences in their lives. No proof that such states can be volitionally "relived" or "reproduced" is given, although empirical evidence pointing to the opposite conclusion, that such states cannot be reproduced, is present, as the tests performed on the Medjugorje visionaries show. The nuns rightly explained to the authors that God cannot be summoned at will; that in itself speaks to the reality that a spontaneous, mystical experience of

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

God cannot be summoned at will and, further, that what the authors studied through the EEG tests was not an actual mystical experience.[8]

A similar problem is evident in the method of an earlier, albeit more influential, study published by the *European Journal of Neuroscience*. The article, titled "Neural Correlates of Religious Experience," was published in 2001 by neuroscientist Nina P. Azari and a number of co-authors.[9] Azari has been recognized for her important work in religious experience and neuroscience.[10] Like Ann Taves, she is highly influenced by Wayne Proudfoot's work in attribution theory in studying religious experiences.[11] However, while the article is titled "Neural Correlates of Religious Experience," after examining the methodology and the subjects that were used in the study it becomes evident, again, that like the Beauregard and Paquette study on Carmelite nuns, the so-called "religious experience" in this case is less than what it is conveyed to be.

What kind of religious experience were Azari and her colleagues examining with neuroimaging technology? "We studied a group of self-identified religious subjects, who attributed their religious experience to a biblical psalm, in order to explore for the first time using

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[8] It is noteworthy that in a future article the authors apply *identical* methodology when, again, using the Carmelite nuns as subjects. See Beauregard and Paquette, "Neural Correlates of a Mystical Experience in Carmelite Nuns," *Neuroscience Letters* 405 (2006): 186-190. In this article the authors write, repeating their methodology verbatim from their previous work: "In the Mystical condition, subjects were asked to remember and relive (eyes closed) the most intense mystical experience ever felt in their lives as a member of the Carmelite Order. This strategy was adopted given that the nuns told us before the onset of the study that 'God can't be summoned at will'" (187).

[9] Nina P. Azari et al., "Neural Correlates of Religious Experience," *European Journal of Neuroscience* 13, no. 8 (2001): 1649-52.

[10] Ann Taves writes of Azari's scholarly work as constituting "pioneering use of brain-imaging techniques to identify neural correlates of religious experience" and emphasizes that Azari "provides the most sophisticated attempt so far to come to terms with the issues surrounding the neuroscientific study of religious experiences." See Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 11.

[11] Proudfoot's influence is strongly evident in the article "Neural Correlates of Religious Experience," two of his most prominent works being used to form the basis for a cognitive attributional theory as an explanation for religious experience. See Azari et al., "Neural Correlates," 1649.

functional neuroimaging the brain areas involved in religious experience."[12] In other words, Azari and her colleagues studied religious subjects who read a biblical psalm. These subjects were members of a Free Evangelical Fundamentalist Community in Germany, all of whom had reported a conversion experience in their lives and for whom the first verse of Psalm 23 was important.[13] "According to their responses in prestudy interviews, the religious subjects regarded the induction of repeated, transient religious states in a single scanning session as antithetical to religious experience (and disrespectful to their faith)."[14] However, "they found it acceptable (and were asked) to induce in themselves, and then sustain for the duration of a given scanning session a unique religious state."[15]

The experiences that were studied, in other words, were admittedly self-induced; they were cultivated through the reading and recitation of biblical psalms. Although such experiences may be *religious*, for the act of reading and reciting biblical texts is known in Christianity as a form of prayer, they are far from being *extraordinary* religious experiences. This is something that the authors have acknowledged, admitting that they used a very standard "stimuli to identify a neurobiological correlate of the concept of 'religious experience' in this initial study. A challenge for future work will be to explore transient religious states and the evolution of other varieties of religious experience."[16]

Notwithstanding the limitations of studying such ordinary "religious experiences," there has been important work done on the relationship between prayer, meditation, and neuroscience. Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Aquili, and Vince Rause have studied the experiences of

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[12] Ibid., 1649.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 1650.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 1652.

Franciscan nuns in prayer and Buddhist practitioners in meditation, documenting the effects on the brain through SPECT scans.[17] A SPECT camera is an imaging-tool that scans inside the head and is used to detect radioactive emissions in the brain, therefore being able to notice distinct conditions of areas of the brain during different states of consciousness.[18] Such studies have been able to detect the beneficial influence that prayer and meditation have on such factors as reducing stress and anxiety while enhancing compassion and social awareness.[19] Although such studies are highly significant, they are, once again, using neuroscience to study *cultivated* experiences in the form of spiritual practices that affect the brain.

Compared to such studies, it is not difficult to see what makes the Medjugorje studies unique. The religious experiences of the Medjugorje visionaries are not standard, ordinary, or simple experiences, but *extraordinary* religious experiences, and they are not, as scientific investigations have shown, cultivated or self-induced by pre-existent efforts such as visualization, memory, the reading of biblical psalms, or prayer and meditation, but are spontaneous experiences. It is true that the visionaries do pray the rosary before experiencing their apparitions; however, so do millions of Catholics around the world, pray the rosary, without ever experiencing an apparition or such a deep state of altered consciousness that the visionaries enter. Thus, it would be unreasonable to conclude through causality that it is the prayer that

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[17] Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 1-10; Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010), 41-56.

[18] Ibid., *Why God Won't Go Away*, 3.

[19] As one example of how neuroscience can discern such factors like compassion or social awareness through areas of the brain, Newberg and Waldman explain that many forms of meditation stimulate an important part of the brain known as the anterior cingulate cortex. "The anterior cingulate cortex is situated between the frontal lobe and the limbic system, acting as a mediator between our feelings and our thoughts. It is involved in social awareness and intuition, and is larger in women than in men. This may explain why women generally are more empathic, socially skilled, and more reactive to fear-inducing stimuli." The fact that spiritual practices like meditation can stimulate the anterior cingulate cortex shows how spirituality can affect the brain and, essentially, influence the shape of characteristics that define a person. See Newberg and Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain*, 52-53.

functions as a stimulus to lead to the experience. Furthermore, there have been instances when the visionaries have experienced apparitions unexpectedly, in environments where prayer was absent, further pointing to the reality of spontaneous experiences.[20]

Much recent scholarship has been dedicated to applying cognitive sciences such as neuroscience to the study of various types of alleged religious experiences. But, unfortunately, very little attention has been given in academia to the scientific studies on the experiences of the Medjugorje visionaries. This is the reality, notwithstanding the fact that the uniqueness of the experiences in Medjugorje, as experiences that are spontaneous and visionary in character, affords scholars of religious experience the opportunity to study a much rarer, and possibly more significant, phenomenon than more common, cultivated, and self-induced experiences.

Contribution to Discourses on Religious Experience

Having examined the major scientific studies on the experiences of the Medjugorje seers, let us consider what contributions these studies can make to discourses and debates about religious experience. Regarding the modern perennialist-constructivist debate, a major issue that was discussed, to which the Medjugorje studies may bring greater clarity, is the question of

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[20] Sullivan explains that the visionaries initially believed that their apparitions would end on July 3, 1981, having read a book on the apparitions in Lourdes and presuming that they would experience the same number of daily apparitions as Bernadette Soubirous did in 1858. Thus, on July 4 the visionaries no longer met in church in front of a crowd with the expectation of receiving another apparition but went their separate ways that day, believing their experiences have ended. Sullivan writes: "News of an end to the apparitions had not yet reached Sarajevo, where the president of the Communist Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina announced on the morning of July 4 that the 'demonstrations' in Medjugorje were officially declared 'counterrevolutionary' [the official government response to devotees gathering publically around the visionaries during their apparitions in Medjugorje]. Oblivious, the seers went their separate ways that evening. Vicka was picking flowers with some friends at 6:25 P.M. when she complained that her fingers had gone suddenly numb, then fell to her knees a moment later and began to stare fixedly at a spot just above her head. The Madonna had appeared to her, she told her companions a few minutes later, sounding, they said, at once frightened and joyous. Each of the others made a similar report. Ivan said that he had seen the Virgin while washing up after a day spent helping his family with the tobacco harvest; Marija's apparition had taken place in her bedroom at home in Bijakovici. Mirjana was the most emotional, phoning from Sarajevo to say that the Madonna had come to her during a grueling police interrogation that had lasted from early that morning until well into the night. On Sunday evening, July 5, the five still in Bijakovici gathered at the church, and again, they said, the Madonna appeared to them. 'We realized then that this was not like Lourdes,' Marija recalled." See Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 106- 107.

reductionism. As already observed, many classic perennial thinkers subscribed to a *sui generis* framework of thinking that elevated religious experience into a special category of its own which isolated the subject from interdisciplinary analysis, partially in light of fears that such analysis can lead to reductionist interpretations of experience. The fears were not without merit, as various academic disciplines have been used to theorize that purported mystical and religious experiences can be explained away through natural or psychopathological categories of understanding. Yet, in this regard, when considering the results of the Medjugorje studies, a powerful point briefly referenced in the previous chapter, which was articulated by Newberg and D'Aquili, comes to mind: "It is possible that with the advent of improved technologies for studying the brain, mystical experiences may finally be differentiated from any type of psychopathology."[21] Herein the scientific studies on the experiences of the Medjugorje visionaries can present a significant contribution to discourses and literature on religious and mystical experiences. Let us expound on this point.

Epileptic-Seizure Interpretations

Newberg and his colleagues explain that:

> Many researchers have found the link between epilepsy and spirituality very compelling. Some researchers have even gone so far as to posthumously diagnose history's greatest mystics as victims of epileptic seizures. Some of these diagnoses suggest, for example, that Mohammed, who heard voices, saw visions, and sweated profusely during his mystical interludes, may have suffered from complex partial seizure. The same type of seizure may have been the source of the blinding light that struck St. Paul on the road to Damascus and caused the auditory hallucinations that led him to believe he had heard the voice of Jesus. Joan of Arc, who also saw a spiritual light and was transfixed by beatific voices, may have suffered ecstatic partial seizures and perhaps an intracranial tuberculoma. Various epileptic states may have been responsible for the visions of the Catholic mystic Saint Teresa of Avila, the conversion experience of Mormon patriarch Joseph Smith, the ecstatic trance states of Emmanuel Swedenborg, even the hyper-religiosity of Vincent Van Gogh.[22]

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[21] Quoted in John Horgan, *Rational Mysticism*, 75.
[22] Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 111.

This modern reasoning which uses epileptic diagnoses to find a natural and pathological explanation for alleged extraordinary religious experiences is an instance of the "medical materialism" that James warned about a century earlier. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that given the diversity of the religious figures which Newberg et al. present, ranging from various religious traditions, and the diversity of their experiences—visionary, auditory, sensory, ecstatic—there is a generalization as well as a reductionism that is in play here. In other words, what is being referenced is that a lot of modern scholarship tends to use epileptic diagnoses not to discredit one form of religious and mystical experience (such as visionary, for example) but all forms of experiences (visionary, auditory, unitive, out-of-body, etc.). There is a gross generalization that permeates this reductionist hermeneutic which looks to epileptic diagnoses to form a basis of understanding.

Newberg and his colleagues are of the *opinion*,[23] one based "on some very simple observations," that certain epileptic symptoms can be differentiated from mystical experiences, although admitting that similarities also exist, and argue therefore that these (the epileptic and the mystical) should be recognized as two distinct types of phenomena: one as pathological and the other as spiritual.[24] Significantly, if we consider the scientific studies on the experiences of the Medjugorje visionaries, it becomes evident that this opinion is no longer simply an opinion but an empirically observable and proven fact.

As was observed, EEG testing indicated no signs of epileptic discharge in the brains of the visionaries during their experiences. The conclusion that no signs of epilepsy were present

[23] Ibid. I accentuate in the italics that it is an opinion here, for Newberg and his colleagues, in order to emphasize the contribution that the Medjugorje studies are able to make by taking such an important opinion and turning it into a demonstrable fact through empirical findings.
[24] Ibid., 111-113.

was also supported by auditory and clinical testing. Dr. Henri Joyeux's French team concluded that there "is no epilepsy, as electro-encephalograms demonstrate."[25] Additionally, Dr. Francois Rouquerol's auditory potential test indicated "that the various pathways to the brain [in the visionaries] are normal. The regular and rounded shape of the graph eliminates auditory hallucination of an epileptic type."[26] This is important to note as epileptic hallucinations can be present in both visual and auditory modes.[27] Even before the French doctors, the Italian physician Dr. Enzo Gabrici observed in the visionaries: "Clinical observation has also excluded hallucinatory phenomena as well as the normal components of epilepsy or of any other malfunction capable of producing the alteration of consciousness."[28] In other words, there was no empirical evidence that the altered state of consciousness that the visionaries enter during their apparitions was an epileptic state, nor did it possess any symptoms of an epileptic state; thus challenging the application of this popular, reductive theory as an universal explanation for all forms of extraordinary religious or mystical experiences.

Interpretations of Hysteria

As observed in a previous chapter, another popular theory of reductionism that has permeated much critical thought about extraordinary religious experiences is the psychopathological interpretation of hysteria. In writing a hermeneutical history of hysteria, historian Mark S. Micale notes how the tendency to substitute hysteria as an alternative explanation for extraordinary religious experiences spoke to a deeper, historical conflict between the worldviews surrounding the cultures of psychiatry and religion. He explains:

> In nearly all historical writing about psychiatry, the religious and psychiatric worldviews are presented at sharp variance with one another. In the 1800s, introductory historical

[25] Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 74-75.
[26] Ibid., 70.
[27] See Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 112.
[28] Laurentin and Joyeux, *op. cit*., 17.

> chapters to psychiatric textbooks and dissertations often pointedly contrasted the current state of enlightened medical knowledge with past religious obscurantism and philosophical mysticism. During the 1930s and 1940s, the first full narrative histories of psychiatry retailed similar scenarios. In his influential *A History of Medical Psychology* (1941), Gregory Zilboorg presented psychiatric history in almost Manichean terms, as the world-historical clash of the religious/supernatural and medical/naturalistic models of the mind. This view was then subsequently bolstered by the biographical literature on Freud. With his outspoken and uncompromising personal atheism, his interpretations of piety as psychopathology, and his polemical antireligious statements *The Future of an Illusion* and *Moses and Monotheism*, the founder of psychoanalysis seemed to exemplify the opposition between institutional religion and psychiatry that has existed throughout history.[29]

The neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot was an eminent thinker who, as previously mentioned, has been known for identifying extraordinary religious and mystical experiences with hysteria. Charcot, as noted, was a pioneering figure in the study of hysteria and in associating it with religious experience; his work did influence the anti-religious convictions of the psychiatric worldview even before Freud.[30]

In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries France was at the center of major cultural and intellectual debates surrounding science and religion, particularly religious

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[29] Mark S. Micale, *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and Its Interpretations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 261.

[30] In fact, Charcot had an influence on a young Sigmund Freud. Hans Küng explains that as a young doctor Freud obtained "a travel scholarship to go to the 'Mecca of neurology,' the Paris nerve clinic [to work] under the great Jean Martin Charcot. Here he began to take an interest in hysteria . . . and in hypnosis (as a healing method), the first beginnings of his *investigation of the soul*, the turning from neurology to psychopathology" (emphasis in original). Stephen A. Mitchell and Margaret J. Black further explain that "Freud started out as a researcher in neurophysiology, and when he switched from research to clinical practice, he treated patients suffering from what were understood to be neurological conditions, victims of damaged or weakened nerves. The dramatic demonstrations of the renowned neurologists Jean-Martin Charcot and Hippolyte Bernheim he witnessed during a stay in France sparked his interest in unconscious ideas, fatefully shifting his focus from brain to mind." Thus not only was Feud influenced by Charcot and the Salpêtrière School but also by Charcot's major rival Bernheim and the Nancy School. Such influences led to breakthrough work for Freud, particularly with patients suffering from hysteria. Mitchell and Black continue: "Before Freud, hysterics—patients who suffered from physical disabilities but evidenced no obvious actual physical impairment—were regarded as malingerers, morally suspect fakers, or victims of a generally weakened nervous system that produced random, meaningless disturbances in functioning. Freud, following Charcot, Bernheim, and other practitioners of medical hypnotism, demonstrated that hysterics suffered a disease not of brain but of mind. It was ideas, not nerves, that were the source of trouble." See Küng, *Freud and the Problem of God*, 17; Stephen A. Mitchell and Margaret J. Black, *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytical Thought* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1995), 2-3.

experience, because of two major events which took place in the country: on the one hand, the revolutionary work of Charcot and fellow doctors at the Neurology Clinic at La Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, re-diagnosing alleged mystical experiences—which included cases of purported miracles, apparitions, visions, stigmata, and even demonic possessions—as pathological cases associated with hysteria, a practice which came to be known as "retrospective medicine."[31] On the other hand, the reported Marian apparitions in the village of Lourdes to the French peasant girl Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, which led to Lourdes becoming a major healing shrine culminating in the formation of the Medical Bureau of Lourdes established to medically investigate miraculous healings at the site, constituted the other major phenomenon which fueled debates between science and religious experience in the culture.[32]

Sofie Lachapelle explains how deeply connected, even conflated, the cultures of religious mystics and the those of hysteria and insanity, from the perspectives of psychology and psychiatry, became during this period: "With the rise of psychology and psychiatry, the subjects [both alleged mystics and demoniacs] were made to leave their homes or sanctuaries for the more sterile and controlled hospital ward."[33] In fact, the cultures of mysticism and the medical

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[31] The term was first introduced by Emile Littre in 1869. Robert Kugelmann explains: "For Littre, demonic possession, miracles such as happened at Lourdes, and mystical experiences were all hysterical in nature. Charcot affirmed Littre's retrospective diagnoses, using his categories of the stages of hysteria." See Robert Kugelmann, *Psychology and Catholicism: Contested Boundaries* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 150-151; also Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 263.

[32] Sofie Lachapelle explains: "Physicians have been included in the proceedings of canonization since the Middle Ages, but the role of medicine in religious enquiries became more important during the nineteenth century. The intrusion of the scientific into the religious has been discussed mostly in regard to Lourdes." Sofie Lachapelle, "Between Miracle and Sickness: Louise Lateau and the Experience of Stigmata and Ecstasy," *Configurations*, vol. 12, no. 1 (winter 2004): 88, n. 20. For a great discussion of the role that Lourdes played in debates on science and religion, especially in the medical culture of nineteenth-century France, see Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 262-277. Kugelmann makes a connection between the miraculous culture of Lourdes with the culture of nineteenth century Spiritualism, as these topics related to the development of psychology; see Kugelmann, *Psychology and Catholicism*, 144-151. For more comprehensive treatments of Lourdes see Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Viking Press, 2009), and Suzanne Kaufman, *Consuming Visions: Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[33] Lachapelle, "Between Miracle and Sickness," 104.

milieu studying pathology were so deeply intertwined, Lachapelle emphasizes, that accounts of mystical experiences contributed to the development of theories of pathology in the medical establishment at the turn of the century:

> The stories of mystics fill the pages of scientific journals of the *fin de siècle.* Living in hospital wards or surrounded by devout followers, portrayed as hysterics or saints, as manipulated or manipulators, these men and (more often) these women played a significant role in the developments of theories of pathological behavior. Though historians have acknowledged this role, it remains little explored.[34]

Charcot's followers did much to advance the work of re-diagnosing alleged mystical phenomena into pathological categories. Desire-Magloire Bourneville, "a disciple of Charcot," looked "at both contemporary and past instances of mysticism, possession, stigmata, and ecstasies, [and] he encouraged a new understanding of such phenomena in pathological terms."[35] Bourneville began publishing the series *La bibliotheque diabolique* in 1883, "comprised of texts that reinterpreted neuropathologically past religious events and personalities."[36] The Marian apparitions at Lourdes were not impervious to such reinterpretation. Auguste Voisin, "an alienist at the Salpêtrière, argued that Bernadette's ecstasies had only been hallucinatory deliria that presaged an acute psychiatric deterioration. The celebrated inspiratress [*sic*] of Lourdes, added Voisin, was in fact currently being cared for at the Ursuline convent of Nevers, where she was now quite insane—a charge that Catholic commentators denied vociferously."[37] Not only was the famous seer of Lourdes being re-diagnosed, notably by doctors who were not present at her apparitions, but so were the masses of people who traveled to the Marian shrine. "Dr. Paul Diday

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[34] Ibid., 103.
[35] Ibid., 102.
[36] Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 261. Lachapelle explains that the work dealt not only with "new contributions to the pathologization of mystical phenomena" but also with "classics of the witchcraft and demonic traditions …." Lachapelle, "Between Miracle and Sickness," 102.
[37] Micale, 264.

(later known for his work in venereology) applied Voisin's pathologizing line of analysis to the pilgrims of Lourdes as a whole."[38]

In 1886, Hippolyte Bernheim, an internist from the University of Nancy in Alsace-Lorraine, who became the leading figure of the "Nancy School," a rival to Charcot's "Salpêtrière School,"[39] posited a parallel "between the hypnotic psychotherapeutics pioneered in his clinic and what he called the 'miraculous therapeutics' of Lourdes. Both phenomena, contended Bernheim, were fully explicable as the result of exaggerated impressionability in susceptible individuals. Piety and hysterical psychopathology resulted equally from excessive autosuggestion."[40] Micale explains that the following decades would find the work of several physicians repeating "with minor variation the Bernheimian analysis."[41]

The noted psychologist Pierre Janet, who was a student and colleague of Charcot,[42] began publishing in the final years of the nineteenth century "on possession, ecstasy, and stigmata, using his previous work on the disaggregation of the personality to understand these religious phenomena in physiological terms."[43] Thomas Acklin explains that Janet's "chief work pertaining to religion was *De l'angoisse à l'extase*, in which he came to describe thought during ecstasy as inferior, regressive, analogous to the thought of small children and infants. Janet found an ensemble of characteristics common to much mystical experience which for him indicated a specific syndrome that he termed 'mystical delirium'."[44] Among the patients that Janet examined

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Micale explains that "Bernheim and his colleagues contributed to the transition to twentieth-century psychological medicine by revealing the errors and excesses of the school of Salpêtrière." Ibid., 26.
[40] Ibid., 264.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 2-3.
[43] Lachapelle, "Between Miracle and Sickness," 101.
[44] Thomas Acklin, O.S.B. "Religious Symbolic Transformations of Desire: A Psychoanalytical and Theological Perspective on Desire in Religion" (PhD diss., Katholieke Universiteit te Leuven, 1982), 373. Noteworthy here is the parallelism between Janet and Freud, both connecting ecstasy or, in Freud's case, the "oceanic feeling," to a regressive and infantile state, or at least an analogous thought pattern resembling such a state.

there was the case of Madeleine, a devout, middle-aged woman who entered Paris' Salpêtrière Hospital in February 1896.[45] Amy Hollywood explains that for "Janet, Madeleine was 'a poor contemporary mystic' whose ecstasies, crucifixion postures, and bleeding wounds (stigmata) were signs of delirium and other pathologies."[46] Lachapelle makes the interesting observation that a "geographical dimension" began to determine whether a mystic's unique experiences should be understood as sacred or pathological. Thus, in the case of Madeleine: "Janet diagnosed her as having suffered from a neurosis since her childhood that had developed into a severe religious delirium with ecstatic crises. There is thus a geographical dimension to the experience of a stigmatic: in the hospital, all phenomena become symptoms, and Madeleine's love for God was turned into pathology."[47] The geographical dimension of taking purported mystics and analyzing their experiences in the hospital ward during this period carried with it, therefore, the *epistemological shift* of perceiving what religious devotees considered signs of the sacred and supernatural as symptoms of the pathological. "Like patients in the wards, mystics had become hysterics: their phenomena were symptoms, and their messages, ramblings."[48]

Historians have acknowledged that there were major ideological battles—religious, political, cultural—in nineteenth-century France which fueled the debates on science and religious experience. Jan Goldstein explains that in the 1870s and 1880s there was an "anti-

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[45] Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 2.

[46] It is important to note, as Hollywood explains, that while partaking in the reinterpretation of Madeleine's experiences into pathological categories Janet, however, "was much more sensitive to Madeleine's religious beliefs and practices than many of his contemporaries, most notably his teacher and collaborator Jean-Martin Charcot, who used retrospective diagnosis as a way of dismissing the religious claims of mystics (as well as demoniacs). Janet allowed a religious advisor to administer to Madeleine while she was in the hospital. He also noted her creativity, delicacy of mind, and intelligence. . . . After her discharge in 1904, Madeleine stayed in close touch with Janet until her death in 1918" (Ibid., 2-3). Similarly, noting how much sincerity Janet saw in Madeleine, notwithstanding his pathological diagnosis of her experiences, Lachapelle explains that "Janet never even considered the possibility of fraud in the case of Madeleine." Lachapelle, "Between Miracle and Sickness," 104.

[47] Lachapelle, 104.

[48] Ibid.

clerical crusade, and the psychiatrists of the Salpêtrière school participated in it enthusiastically."[49] Micale expounds on these issues:

> Nineteenth-century French physicians, from Calmeil to Charcot, working self-consciously within an anticlerical Enlightenment tradition, produced authoritative-sounding commentaries that diagnosed past religious behaviors as signs of hysterical pathology. Similarly, Veith's *Hysteria: The History of a Disease* . . . highlights the struggle of modern science to free itself from mystical, spiritistic, or demonological readings of the disease. Most recently, Goldstein . . . has written extensively about the relation between hysteria doctors and clericalism during the age of Charcot. In France during the final quarter of the nineteenth century, the long-running conflict between the Catholic Church and political republicanism entered a particularly antagonistic phase. The school of Salpêtrière, Goldstein has established played a significant part in this confrontation, laicizing hospital nursing staffs, establishing new chairs on the Paris Medical Faculty, and publishing the *Bibliotheque Diabolique*, comprised of texts that reinterpret neuropathologically past religious events and personalities. In the theoretical realm, Charcot integrated into his work elements of demonological hysteria reformulated in the terms of positivist medicine. Charcot's newly scientized theory of the disease, Goldstein has contended, was a classic episode in the historical clash of the religious and the scientific mentalities, with the latter emerging triumphant.[50]

Psychopathological reductionism toward religious experiences, although having historical roots in the development of sciences such as psychiatry, is not a reality of the past but one that continues to find advocates in the present. It is also perceivable, for example, in the reductionism articulated by Oliver Sacks, as he commented about the experiences of medieval mystics: "It is impossible to ascertain in the vast majority of cases, whether the experience represents a

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[49] Cited in Kugelmann, *Psychology and Catholicism*, 150; original reference from Jan Goldstein, "The Hysteria Diagnosis and the Politics of Anticlericalism in Late Nineteenth-Century France," *Journal of Modern History*, 54, no. 2 (June 1982): 209-39.

[50] Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 261. Betraying the ideological ambitions of an evident scientism, Janet wrote on the subject of miraculous healings: "we must study the science of miracles so that we may be able to reproduce them at will. Day by day…the domain of the supernatural is being restricted, thanks to the extension of the domain of science. One of the most notable among scientific victories over the mysteries of the universe will be achieved when we have tamed, have domesticated, the therapeutic miracle." Cited in Kugelmann, *Psychology and Catholicism*, 154-155; original reference from Pierre Janet, *Psychological Healing: A Historical and Clinical Study*, trans. E. Paul and C. Paul (New York: Arno, 1972); first published 1925.

hysterical or psychotic ecstasy, the effects of intoxication or an epileptic or migrainous manifestation."[51]

In light of such reductive theories, and those that have come before, the scientific studies on the Medjugorje seers make a contribution toward reaching greater clarity regarding the universalism of these and similar interpretations; as in Medjugorje psychological and clinical studies, performed by various doctors throughout the years, have consistently shown the visionaries to be mentally healthy individuals who do not possess any symptoms of hysteria or any indications of psychosis.[52] Thus, the *universal application* of the hysteria diagnosis, as an all-encompassing explanation for extraordinary religious or mystical experiences, is undermined; as are the other diagnoses promulgated by Sacks as alternative theories of explanation: psychosis, intoxication, epilepsy or migraine-induced manifestations (as the Medjugorje visionaries did not possess any of these conditions, nor related symptoms either). This does not mean that any past report of mystical experience could not fall into any of these categories; of course, such reports could, as not all experiences are authentic. However, the case of the Medjugorje seers, empirically examined for such natural and pathological conditions, does pose an exception to the reductionist rule in terms of applying an all-encompassing epistemology that would categorize each and every extraordinary religious or mystical experience as either natural or pathological.

Interpretations of Hallucination

Other variations of an all-encompassing reductionism have been used to reinterpret such phenomena as visionary experiences. Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist at Oxford and

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[51] As quoted in Callahan, *Women Who Hear Voices*, 10. For original source see Sacks, "The Visions of Hildegard," 168.
[52] Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 54.

popular atheist author, writes in his best-selling book *The God Delusion* about the subject of extraordinary religious experiences, making reference to Marian apparitions. Dawkins argues:

> Constructing models is something the human brain is very good at. When we are asleep it is called dreaming; when we are awake we call it imagination or, when it is exceptionally vivid, hallucination. . . . If we are gullible, we don't recognize hallucination or lucid dreaming for what it is and we claim to have seen or heard a ghost; or an angel; or God; or – especially if we happen to be young, female and Catholic – the Virgin Mary. Such visions and manifestations are certainly not good grounds for believing that ghosts or angels, gods or virgins, are actually there.[53]

While Dawkins may be unwittingly promulgating a sexist argument in articulating that young, Catholic females would especially be prone to having hallucinations or vivid dreams of the Virgin Mary, he is essentially making a constructivist claim in enunciating that such visions, or apparitions, are either natural or pathological and, therefore, a product of the mind. An all-encompassing reductionism is also present in the way that Dawkins dismisses all forms of religious or spiritual visionary experience as either a case of lucid dreaming or hallucination, akin to the hermeneutical trends that Underhill criticized in rationalists and that James criticized in medical materialism.

The EEG tests on the Medjugorje visionaries again make a significant contribution here in presenting a case that empirically calls into question the universality of this reductionist argument, as the tests showed that the visionaries are hyper-awake during their apparitions—thus the experiences cannot be a case of lucid dreaming—and as the EEG exams, combined with visual and auditory tests, showed that the visionaries are not suffering from any kind of hallucination during their experiences. Lucid dreaming, pathological hallucination, visual hallucination, and auditory hallucination were all discredited as possible alternative explanations for the apparitions, the visionaries being free of all such natural and pathological symptoms. Yet,

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[53] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 91.

they still enter an inexplicable altered state of consciousness during their apparitions and report to see and encounter the Virgin Mary, having experiences that transcend the interpretative framework of Dawkins' explanatory reductionism. Additionally, given the fact that two of the six visionaries are males the gender-specificity of Dawkins' claim, alleging that it is young, Catholic females who would be inclined to such experiences, is also challenged.

Dawkins is not, by any means, the only author who has dismissed all visionary experiences like Marian apparitions as hallucinations. Another prominent example of this, coming from a psychoanalytical model, is a book published by Princeton University Press in 1986, Michael P. Carroll's *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins*.[54] Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz explains that Carroll's book "attracted a considerable amount of attention," while admitting, however, that "Carroll's attempts to explain Marian devotion in terms of classical Freudianism have not been very convincing to most reviewers," although the work, according to Zimdars-Swartz, should still be high-priority reading for those interested in Marian apparitions.[55] Using psychoanalytical theories, Carroll dismisses all reported cases of Marian apparitions as constituting either illusions or hallucinations or, in some cases, a combination or admixture of each. Applying an elaborate, psychoanalytical hypothesis Carroll argues, using Freudian Oedipal-complex ideas, that father-ineffective families affect the sexual desires of sons for their mothers, and that fervent "devotion to the Mary cult on the part of males is a practice that allows males characterized by a strong but strongly repressed sexual desire for the mother to dissipate in an acceptable manner the excess sexual energy that is built up as a result of this

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[54] Michael P. Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986). For reviews of Carroll's book see Daniel Bornstein, *Church History*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Dec., 1988): 581-583; Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* Vol. 55, No. 3 (Autumn, 1987): 593-597; John H. Gagnon, *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (May, 1988): 376-377.
[55] Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary*, 278.

desire."[56] Inversely, Carroll argues that identifying "strongly with the Virgin Mary allows women to experience vicariously the fulfillment of their desire for sexual contact with, and a baby from, their fathers."[57]

It is not difficult to discern why most reviewers did not take Carroll's classical Freudianism seriously as a phenomenological explanation for Marian devotion, given that repressed, unconscious sexual desires that children allegedly have for their parents (in itself a controversial Freudian claim) is possibly the last thing that Marian devotees cogitate when considering their veneration for the *Virgin* Mary.[58] However, an aspect of Carroll's thesis that more readers would take seriously, given how much skepticism exists on the subject, is his conclusion that all Marian apparitions can be explained either as illusions or hallucinations, or an admixture that combines components from each.[59]

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[56] Carroll, *Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 56.
[57] Ibid., 59.
[58] In fact, Carroll's hermeneutical methods in reaching these conclusions have been highly criticized by reviewers. Daniel Bornstein has alleged that Carroll displays limited knowledge of the vast literature on Marian apparitions and claims that Carroll "often distorts the studies that he does cite." Of particular concern to Bornstein is Carroll's elevation of psychoanalysis as the one and only framework of thought through which to understand the subject of apparitions, seeing an unhealthy dogmatism in the approach. "For Carroll, the psychoanalytic method constitutes an autonomous belief system, a sort of religion with its own sacred texts (the words of Freud, to which Carroll turns for guidance in any moment of uncertainty), its own revealed truth (the sexual origin of all activity), and its own fundamentalist insistence on the superiority of that revealed truth over mere sensory perception or human reason." Bornstein uses strong language in criticizing Carroll's book, arguing that scholars "interested in a sophisticated application of psychological theory to religious history will find this book an embarrassment," and concludes his review with an incendiary note regarding Carroll's publisher: "Princeton University Press should be ashamed of itself." While using less incendiary language, other reviews of Carroll's methodology have been equally negative. Jeffrey Burton Russell has written that while "claiming to describe the origins of the cult [of the Virgin Mary], Carroll shows virtually no understanding of modern historical scholarship" and "ignores contemporary studies of sexuality and religion in the early and medieval church—for example, the work of Peter Brown, Caroline Bynum, and Charles Wood." Russell argues that Carroll's book "is a very model of reductionism." Akin to Bornstein, Russell is highly critical of how Carroll applies a single intellectual system—one branch of psychology in Freudian psychoanalysis—to account for the entire truth regarding the complexity of religious apparitions. Coming from a sociological perspective, John H. Gagnon likewise finds Carroll's reductionist approach unimpressive, explaining: "Perhaps the fundamental problem is using the tools of modern positivist social science to *explain away* religious experience, rather than attempting to interpret and understand acts of devotion and adoration" (emphasis in original). See Bornstein, *Church History*, 582-583; Russell, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 594; Gagnon, *Contemporary* Sociology, 377; all reviews as cited in note 54 of this chapter.
[59] Carroll, *Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 117.

Carroll analyzes the major Marian apparitions such as Lourdes (1858), Fatima (1917), Medjugorje, and others. He argues that there were three sets of Marian apparitions wherein hallucinations were preceded by illusions. In this grouping he includes Medjugorje, writing: "The third set of Marian hallucinations probably preceded by an illusion were the apparitions at the village of Medjugorje in Hercegovina, Yugoslavia."[60] In this regard, Carroll further writes: "From the start, one or more of the Medjugorje seers reported both seeing and hearing the Virgin. Since other observers present heard nothing, it seems clear that at least the auditory components of these apparitions (assuming sincerity on the part of the seers) were hallucinations."[61]

But, as we have already seen, the scientific studies on the seers argue against this conclusion, as auditory tests showed that the auditory pathways of the visionaries are completely normal and that they are not experiencing any auditory, nor for that matter visual or pathological, hallucination during their experiences. Carroll further attributes the fact that a bright light was seen by many observers during the first days of the apparitions (while the seers were reporting their encounters with the Virgin Mary) with the theory that the apparitions began as an illusion.[62] Thus, he speculates that "the first few apparitions at Medjugorje, or at least the visual component of these first few apparitions, were probably illusions. Once the local community accepted the reality of the apparitions, however (which seems to have occurred relatively rapidly), the children began having true hallucinations on an almost daily basis."[63] If one were to take Carroll's hypothesis seriously then the conclusion would have to be that three of the visionaries, the three who as adults claim to continue experiencing daily apparitions, have been experiencing

[60] Ibid., 123.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 124.
[63] Ibid.

daily hallucinations for over thirty years now since their teenage years. The fact that clinical and psychological testing has consistently shown the visionaries to be mentally healthy people without any traces of hallucinatory or hysterical symptoms, in addition to the neuroscientific, auditory, and visual exams that proved that the visionaries are free of every form of hallucination, highly undermines the probability and validity of Carroll's thesis.

Methodological Considerations

In his defense, Carroll's book was published in 1986, which means that he was writing the work around the same time as the first major scientific examinations were being carried out on the Medjugorje visionaries. His conclusions, therefore, were based more on theoretical speculation rather than scientific examination. The subsequent publication of the scientific studies on the visionaries, however, would contain empirical evidence disproving significant components of Carroll's thesis.

There is also a methodological issue that arises in considering Carroll's treatment of Marian apparitions. Carroll explains his method: "If we approach the study of Marian apparitions (or any set of religious apparitions) on the premise that they are produced by natural causes, then it is evident that they are either *illusions or hallucinations*" (emphasis in original).[64] The problem with Carroll's approach is that the starting principle or premise on which he bases his research can be false and it can, therefore, lead to faulty conclusions. Carroll begins with the general principle that Marian apparitions are caused by natural means and, thereafter, proceeds to employ a psychoanalytical phenomenology as the underlying basis for understanding those natural means, pointing to the conclusion of "Marian hallucinations."[65] However, as the

[64] Ibid., 117.
[65] Ibid., 123.

scientific studies on the visionaries display, Carroll's conclusions, at least in the case of Medjugorje, were faulty, pointing to the plausibility that his research is based on a false premise.

This fact is further supported by the combination of the algometer and EEG studies performed by the 1985 Italian team on the visionaries; the algometer, again, showing that the visionaries were impervious to pain during their apparitions while the EEGs showing, among other things, that they were in a state of consciousness that is hyper-awake. Dr. Luigi Frigerio, as quoted earlier, articulated that these results presented a contradiction that "cannot be explained naturally, and thus can be only preternatural or supernatural." [66] It is important to note that this is not a theological judgment, as the doctor is not saying that the Virgin Mary is appearing, but it is a scientific judgment, as the doctor is articulating, through the usage of scientific instruments, that the phenomenon presents a paradox, in the combination of the state of hyper-wakefulness with the imperviousness to external pain, that cannot be explained naturally. Thus, here we have further empirical evidence showing how faulty the hypothesis that all Marian apparitions may be explained through natural means can be, as Carroll promulgated, leading to research that is dangerously set up to attain questionable conclusions. Here it is important to recognize that the scientific studies on the visionaries help us to make hermeneutical judgments, making a significant contribution to discourses on religious experience. Those hermeneutical judgments substantially challenge an all-encompassing reductionism which epistemologically reduces all extraordinary religious experiences to natural, psychological, or pathological categories.

It is ironic for there is an inversion to classical perennialism in what is being challenged here. Classical perennialists argued for the presence of universal, underlying core characteristics that are cross-culturally present in all authentic religious and mystical experiences. Inversely,

[66] As quoted in Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 204.

many critics who have subscribed to an all-encompassing reductionism on extraordinary religious experiences (such as Dawkins, Carroll, Sacks, complete constructivists, or the various researchers that apply an epileptic-seizure diagnosis as a universal alternative explanation) also argue for certain core characteristics that encapsulate all claims of extraordinary religious experiences. These core characteristics, however, have the reductive quality of constituting natural and psychopathological categories of interpretation, such as visualization, self-suggestion, hypnosis, hysteria, epilepsy, hallucinations, psychosis, unconsciously repressed sexual desires, obsessional neurosis, and so on. The scientific results on the Medjugorje visionaries substantially challenge and undermine the universality of such reductionist hermeneutics.

It is interesting how eclectic the challenge is that the Medjugorje studies offer to reductionist theories of interpretation. Some of the tests performed on the visionaries, as previously observed, very directly eliminate the possibility of conditions like epilepsy or hallucination. There is also the hypnosis test, however, which challenges the universalism of reductive theories of self-suggestion and visualization. It was shown that the altered state of consciousness that the visionaries enter during their apparitions is radically different from the state of consciousness that they enter under hypnosis when, through suggestion and visualization, an attempt was made to “re-create” their apparitional experiences. This brings to mind Taves’ treatment of Barnard’s out-of-body experience. Although it was pointed out that visionary experiences and out-of-body experiences are two phenomenologically different experiences, questioning whether Taves was right to use the reductive logic that is often applied to explain one (visualization as causing visionary experiences) as a way to explain the other (visualization as causing out-of-body experiences), such experiences may share at least a single major

similarity: both experiences constitute states of altered consciousness. Taves explained that relatively little research has been done "on the role of practices (visualization, meditation, chanting, fasting, et cetera) in triggering unusual experiences," although she also explained that there is "considerable historical and anecdotal evidence to suggest that this is often the case."[67] Using such evidence[68] she hypothesized that Barnard's out-of-body experience was triggered through a process of visualization; thus the visualization triggering a state of altered consciousness. However, in the case of the Medjugorje studies, we have an empirical challenge to such theories of reductive thinking which would consider visualization as an ultimate triggering cause for altered states of consciousness that are understood as extraordinary religious experiences. With the Medjugorje visionaries, visualization techniques through suggestion and imagination were used under hypnosis in an attempt to recreate their apparitional experiences, and the state of consciousness that was reached was incredibly different from the apparition state, showing that visualization does not constitute an explanation for their experiences. Here one wonders whether the same could be the case for Barnard's out-of-body experience as well as other reported religious or mystical phenomena which have been dismissed by scholars as simply being the natural products of suggestion, imagination, and visualization.

The underlying issue here is methodology, the danger of allowing the application of a hermeneutic in studying religious experiences whose structure necessitates the formulation of theories that satisfy a predetermined conclusion. To take this point further, let us consider the

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[67] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 110.

[68] In addition to studies by neuroscientists who "have recently identified the regions of the brain that govern the sense of embodiment (Blanke et al. 2004, 2005; Arzy et al. 2006) and are now able to experimentally induce rudimentary out-of-body experiences (Ehrsson, 2007; Lenggenhager et al. 2007), though there are as yet no studies that link practices [such as visualization, fasting, prayer] with the manipulation of those brain areas." In other words, while Taves additionally uses the work of neuroscientists who have identified regions of the brain associated with embodiment to support her argument, she concedes that such regions have not been linked with practices such as visualization; thus identifying an evident gap in the argument. See Ibid., 111.

experiences of the Medjugorje visionaries in light of Carroll's treatment of them in comparison to that of the scientists who empirically examined the visionaries.

It is one thing to say that the Medjugorje visionaries are hallucinating and then employ psychoanalytical theories that try to justify this premise; it is another thing to leave the question of what the visionaries are experiencing open and, through a process of discovery, use cognitive sciences to ascertain that the visionaries are not hallucinating and, thereby, come closer to the correct answer by empirically eliminating false possibilities. The former method was employed by Carroll; the latter by the doctors who examined the visionaries. Here the issue is methodology. The former method attempts to justify a predetermined conclusion through theoretical speculation within the intellectual framework of psychoanalysis. The latter method attempts to attain a conclusion through empirical examination without limiting the possibilities to the interpretive framework of a single intellectual system.

It is important to stress here that the issue, meaning the problem, is not psychoanalysis, but methodology. In other words, there are various things that psychoanalysis can contribute to an understanding of religion. However, if psychoanalytical theories are used to form the *dominant* hermeneutical framework that tries to justify reductionist conclusions about religious experiences, while ignoring the contribution of other sciences that help grasp a fuller picture of the subject, then the complexity and multifariousness of many religious experiences is not given the due that is deserved. This, as the example of Carroll's interpretation of the Medjugorje apparitions shows, can lead to misguided conclusions about such phenomena.

Interpretations of Freud

Let us also consider the original Freudian interpretation. As mentioned earlier, Freud first articulated his connection between neurosis and religion in his 1907 essay "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices," wherein Freud compared common religious practices with the "rituals"

that his OCD patients compulsively performed to control their neurotic obsessions. His later writings would attempt to take the argument further. Küng explains:

> Freud was at first concerned simply to corroborate from the history of religion the thesis he had put forward as early as 1907, that religious rites are similar to neurotic obsessive actions. This he did in four essays published as a book under the general title *Totem and Taboo* (1912). Whether investigating the horror of incest (first essay), taboo prohibitions as a whole (second essay), animism and magic (third essay), or even totemism (fourth essay), he finds everywhere a similarity between the customs and religious attitudes of primitives, on the one hand, and the obsessive actions of his neurotic patients on the other, everywhere a survival of primitive mental life up to the present time. Nevertheless Freud now modifies his former provocative statement to the effect that religion is a universal obsessional neurosis.[69]

While through his comparative study of the religious attitudes of primitive peoples and his neurotic patients Freud came to the theoretical conclusion that religion is, in its essence, a universal obsessional neurosis, there has been important work done undermining the tenets of this hypothesis. Critique has particularly been aimed toward the dependability of this hypothesis in Freud's 1907 essay, as the foundational work establishing a connection between religion and neurosis.

In his dissertation, *Freud on Ritual: Reconstruction and Critique*, Volney P. Gay makes a strong argument, supported by linguistic and psychoanalytical analysis, that scholars have accepted Freud's psychology of religion without realizing that it (and their acceptance of it) is based on an erroneous reading of "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices." "It is my thesis," Gay explains, that "in opposition to his rhetorical expressions and to the usual acceptance of their psychoanalytic validity, Freud never demonstrated and in fact never claimed (in the 1907 essay) that religious rituals shared with obsessive actions a common genesis in the workings of repression."[70] Gay argues that the popular Freudian notion that religion and neurosis have an

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[69] Küng, *Freud and the Problem of God*, 36.
[70] Volney P. Gay, *Freud on Ritual: Reconstruction and Critique* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1979), 2.

intrinsic connection in the form of repression, as the psychopathological mechanism that "secretly linked obsessional acts with religious practices," is undermined when Freud's essay is studied closely and it becomes clear that in his language Freud is describing *suppression* and *not repression* as the mechanism underlying religious practices. The distinction is monumental, Gay explains, because if "neurotic anxiety is a function of repression, and if the anti-instinctual mechanism typical of religious acts is suppression (and not repression), then it would seem to follow that the 'anxiety' which Freud ascribes to pious individuals who perform certain religious rituals cannot be neurotic anxiety."[71] The importance of this argument is further highlighted in a fundamental distinction between repression and suppression: the former implies pathological behavior while the latter does not. Repression, in psychoanalytical thought, is a mechanism that "entails or implies the presence of psychopathology" while suppression, on the other hand, "only implies the presence of instinct control" and, therefore, is not associated with psychopathology but denotes behavior that is healthy.[72]

The central foundations of Gay's thesis are based on a close linguistic reading of Freud's text. Gay explains:

> Throughout most of the essay, Freud carefully describes the anti-instinctual mechanism typical of obsessive acts as *Verdrangung* (repression) and that which is typical of religious acts as *Unterdruckung* (suppression) or as *Verzicht* (renunciation). The linguistic distinction seems significant in light of the crucial topographic and dynamic differences by which Freud distinguished the two processes. Since even in the earliest analytic literature "repression" was said to be one of the main features in the genesis of neurotic disorders, and since Freud's goal in this essay is to demonstrate an underlying similarity between obsessional acts and religious behavior, we would expect him to

[71] Gay qualifies this by explaining that: "Of course the trust and hope which the pious place upon their ritual acts may be quite misbased in fact and have their origins in dynamically unconscious notions of grandiosity, the omnipotence of thoughts, and other fantasies typical of the neurotic. However, it is not a man's fantasies which make him a neurotic, it is his ego's response to those fantasies, namely repression, which determined the extent of the symptoms generated by internal conflict. If we assume with Freud that the pious person's ego does not repress, but only suppresses, it follows that his worries and behavior cannot rightly be called neurotic." Ibid., 8.
[72] Ibid., 28.

> demonstrate that repression is the fundamental mechanism responsible for the formation of religious ceremonies. However, he does not.[73]

In fact, in his study of Freud's text Gay notes that Freud equates the word *Verzicht* with *Unterdruckung*, that is "renunciation" with "suppression," and that it is these terms that Freud associates with religious rituals and behavior.[74] Gay further notes that Freud would not conflate the meaning of "suppression" with "repression," nor use the terms interchangeably, as his writing displays that "Freud's technical description of the anti-institutional processes typical of both kinds of behavior reveals that he consistently distinguished the mechanism of *repression* which he says operates in the formation of obsessional neurosis from that of *suppression* or renunciation which he ascribes to religious behavior."[75]

In addition to the claim that Freud would not equate "repression" with "suppression," textual analysis also provides evidence that neither would Freud equate "repression" with "renunciation" (the other term that is applied in his essay in association with religious practices). This point becomes evident when considering the very meaning of the term "renunciation," Gay argues, as a word that denotes a fully conscious act of resignation. "Clearly, one can only renounce a desire or resign from an attempt to fulfill it if one is fully conscious of entertaining it as a wish which is either to be granted in the future or fulfilled, through fantasy expression, in the present."[76] Gay's point is that *the deliberate consciousness* that is required of renunciation further supports his thesis that Freud was not referring to repression when writing of the mechanism that underlies religious behavior (which Freud described in the language of

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[73] Ibid., 6-7.
[74] It is clear that Freud equates these terms as he, in fact, uses them in the same sentence to denote the same function. Gay notes Freud's words in articulating that religious formation "seems to be based on the suppression, the renunciation of, certain instinctual impulses." Ibid., 6-7.
[75] Ibid., 6.
[76] Ibid., 7.

"suppression" and "renunciation"[77]), as repression, in Freud's metapsychological essays, "involves *unconscious processes* which are not available to deliberation or judgment"[78]—in other words, constituting phenomenologically different (in fact, polar opposite) processes.[79]

If correct, the implications behind Gay's arguments are monumental for, as Küng previously explained, with his subsequent writings on religion Freud tried to corroborate and develop further the theory established in his 1907 essay, seeing similarities behind neurosis and religious rituals; however, the basis of his subsequent work on religion may have been founded on a theory that was misapplied; Freud's rhetoric on religion and universal neurosis being based on a work that possibly never actually established the connection between the two. "If I am correct," Gay writes, "it follows that Freud and his followers misapplied the full-fledge metapsychology of psychoanalytic theory."[80] This bold thesis is not dissimilar from the one made by Anthony Perovich, as observed in a previous chapter, which claimed that constructivist scholars may have misread and misapplied Kant's epistemology as the foundational framework for developing their hermeneutical ideas. Gay's point takes it a step further, however, as it associates the misapplication of the original idea not simply with subsequent scholars but with the original author. He argues, therefore, that Freud got carried away with the overt rhetoric of his 1907 essay, which implied a connection between religion and neurosis, to the point that Freud failed to see in his later work that he never *technically* established a connection between religion and neurosis in the psychoanalytical reasoning of his 1907 work. Gay concludes that

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[77] Gay contrasts the usage of terminology in Freud's essay, noting the significance in the distinctions as referring to diametrically different processes. "The primary fact which lies at the bottom of obsessional neurosis is always '*the repression of an instinctual impulse . . .* ['Verdrangung einer Triebregung']," Freud explains, while further explaining that the "formation of religion . . . seems to be based on the suppression, the renunciation of, certain instinctual impulses [' . . . der Religionsbildung scheint die Unterdruckung, der Verzicht auf gewisse Triebregungen zugrunde zu liegen.']." Ibid., 6.
[78] Emphasis mine.
[79] Gay, *Freud and Ritual*, 7.
[80] Ibid., 9.

"because the clinical model of obsessional neurosis entails the repression hypothesis and because, as we have seen, Freud never showed that religious rituals exemplified repressive behaviors, it follows that when he uses the model of obsessional neurosis to explain religious behavior he does so on inadequate metapsychological grounds."[81]

Interestingly, the case of Medjugorje provides further empirical evidence challenging the religion-neurosis connection *on the basis of psychological grounds*. Therefore, in addition to Gay's use of linguistic and psychoanalytical analysis that has been able to identify the central missing link (the mechanism of repression) between religion and obsessional neurosis in the foundational psychoanalytic literature, in Medjugorje the application of firsthand, clinical studies on the visionaries has also identified an absence of neurosis through psychological examination. In Medjugorje we have a case study wherein a group of people are purportedly experiencing one of the most extraordinary forms of religion imaginable, an alleged apparition of the Mother of God, and, according to clinical studies, do not possess any symptoms of neurosis: undermining the Freudian notion that neurosis and religion must have an intrinsic connection, whether analogously, or that the two, in fact, refer to the same phenomenon. The concluding clinical report of Dr. Joyeux's French team, once again, read: "The visionaries have no symptoms of anxiety or obsessional neurosis, phobic or hysterical neurosis, hypochondriac/or psychosomatic neurosis, and there is no indication of any psychosis. We can make these formal statements in the light of detailed clinical examinations."[82]

A distinction can be made that in his major writings on religion Freud is, however, studying *rituals*, and *not* extraordinary experiences, to which he attributes neurotic behavior. The distinction is not completely without merit, as Bernard McGinn explains that "Freud paid tribute

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[81] Ibid., 15.
[82] Laurentin and Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies*, 54.

to [his friend Romain] Rolland as a representative of the difference between higher, mystical religion and the religion of the common people he had attacked in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927)."[83] Rolland, as previously mentioned, was the friend of Freud's who wrote about mystical experiences in the terminology of encountering an "oceanic feeling." Here Freud had to address something higher than the common religious rituals and practices that he was criticizing in his writings. These matters of mystical experience were not easy to dismiss for Freud, who admitted that the "views expressed by my friend whom I so much admire…caused me no small difficulty. I cannot discover this 'oceanic' feeling in myself. It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings."[84]

McGinn emphasizes that in "his letters to Rolland, Freud admitted the complexity of the nature of mystical experience and the tentative character of his own analysis."[85] McGinn further speculates that there "may be hints in these letters and even in the first chapter of *Civilization and its Discontents* that transient forms of mystical experience can have a positive, cathartic value."[86] Here McGinn uses the ambiguous language that there "may be hints" as he admits that Freud actually wrote very little, and with ambivalence, about mystical experiences.[87] Notwithstanding the fact that Freud's writings reveal hints that mystical experiences can have positive and cathartic effects, this does not mean that Freud would consider such experiences to be authentic, as for him all forms of religion stem from the same psychological origins of the mind.

> Of course, even if there are the germs of a more positive view of mysticism in Freud, there can be no question of any transcendental dimension to mystical consciousness. On

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[83] Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1991), 332.
[84] Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 11.
[85] McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, 332.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.

> the whole, Freud clearly emphasized the regressive aspects of all religion and this is the view that has become canonical in the Freudian school, although some recent psychoanalysts have begun to suggest other possibilities.[88]

Therefore, while it is not improper to make a distinction between the predominant (or "common") forms of religion that the majority of Freud's writings criticize, in terms of piety and ritualism, on the one hand, and higher forms of mystical religion as Freud acknowledged in his friend Romain Rolland, on the other hand, it is improper to take the distinction too far, as if separating the ontological origin of the two. Freud's approach toward religion was fixed, in the sense that in Freud's psychoanalytical phenomenology *all religion*, without distinction (therefore, the common expressions and the higher, more unique expressions), were man-made experiences whose underlying causes were rooted in repressed neurosis stemming from the mind. This is not to say that Freud's writings have not made insightful contributions to understanding facets of religious experiences; they have, particularly in regard to such issues as sublimation in religious experiences or more deviant forms of religious behavior. Much can be gained from Freud's insights.[89] However, in the case of the Medjugorje seers who, despite experiencing extraordinary religious experiences on a daily basis, are free of all forms or symptoms of neurosis, we see a significant challenge to a dominant theme underlying Freudian understandings of religion: the rooted connection to neurosis. The thesis proposed by Gay through linguistic and psychoanalytical analysis, arguing the absence of an intrinsic connection between religion and neurosis in the foundational psychoanalytic literature, is developed[90] and

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[88] Ibid.

[89] For an excellent usage of Freudian psychoanalysis to understanding the psychological dynamics of an alleged case of possession, see Antoine Vergote, *Guilt and Desire: Religious Attitudes and Their Pathological Derivatives*, trans, M.H. Wood (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1988), 214-221. See also note 136 of this chapter for psychoanalytical insights to sublimation in the religious experiences of Teresa of Avila and mystics reporting similar, erotically-oriented, spiritual experiences.

[90] In claiming that Gay's thesis is developed and advanced by the Medjugorje studies I am referring to the fact that if there is not a technical connection made between neurosis and religion in the original psychoanalytic literature,

empirically advanced here. It is done so in another, albeit still psychological, manner through clinical studies on visionaries and their extraordinary religious experiences. Their experiences have been tested and found to be completely free of a diagnosis that could link religion to neurosis.

Epistemological and Hermeneutical Considerations

In an 1890 essay called "The Hidden Self," which William James wrote for *Scribner's Magazine*, James acknowledged that no subject "has usually been treated with a more contemptuous scientific disregard than the mass of phenomena generally called *mystical*."[91] He noted that when it comes to mystical phenomena:

> Physiology will have nothing to do with them. Orthodox psychology turns its back upon them. Medicine sweeps them out; or, at most, when in an anecdotal vein, records a few of them as "effects of the imagination," a phrase of mere dismissal whose meaning, in this connection, it is impossible to make precise. All the while, however, the phenomena are there, lying broadcast over the surface of history. No matter where you open its pages, you find things recorded under the name of divinations, inspirations, demoniacal possessions, apparitions, trances, ecstasies, miraculous healings. . . .[92]

James then continued to make important epistemological observations, noting that mystical phenomena are considered by many to be unusual and inexplicable occurrences and, therefore, they pose a problem for various systems of thought whose interpretative frameworks cannot account for such phenomena. "The ideal of every science," James explains, "is that of a closed and completed system of truth."[93] In this regard, James notes the evident, epistemological clash between various sciences and inexplicable phenomena like the mystical:

> Each one of our various *ologies* seems to offer a definite head of classification for every possible phenomenon of the sort which it professes to cover; and, so far from free is most men's fancy, that when a consistent and organized scheme of this sort has once been

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as Gay claims, the absence of that connection (between neurosis and religion) is further promulgated by the Medjugorje studies, even if no direct reference is made to Freud or psychoanalysis.

[91] William James, "The Hidden Self," *Scribner's Magazine* 7, no. 3 (March 1890): 361.

[92] Ibid., 361-362.

[93] Ibid., 361.

> comprehended and assimilated, a different scheme is unimaginable. No alternative, whether to whole or parts, can any longer be conceived as possible. Phenomena unclassifiable within the system are therefore paradoxical absurdities, and must be held untrue.[94]

Interestingly, here James spoke to an epistemological reality or outlook, or – one could even venture to say – *ideology* that many scholars, including Freud, would turn to.

It would not be inappropriate to use the word *ideology* here if we understand the term to refer to a strict abidance to a certain way of thinking, thus to a certain system of thought, as if anything which contradicts or transcends that system of thought must be disregarded as untrue. Essentially, this is what Freud's method came down to in regard to the "oceanic feeling." He contemplated the enigma of the phenomenon of the oceanic feeling and came to the conclusion that it is so alien to the fabric of the science of psychology, to its framework of understanding, that it is justifiable to call into question the authenticity of this type of experience and deliberately look to explain it away in natural (thus psychologically-friendly) ways. Freud wrote thus of his approach toward interpreting the oceanic feeling:

> From my own experience I could not convince myself of the primary nature of such a feeling. But this gives me no right to deny that it does in fact occur in other people. The only question is whether it is being correctly interpreted and whether it ought to be regarded as the *fons et origo* of the whole need for religion.
>
> I have nothing to suggest which could have a decisive influence on the solution of this problem. The idea of men's receiving an intimation of their connection with the world around them through an immediate feeling which is from the outset directed to that purpose sounds so strange and fits in so badly with the fabric of our psychology that one is justified in attempting to discover a psycho-analytic—that is, a genetic—explanation of such a feeling.[95]

Here we see an epistemological precursor to modern constructivist, attributional, and reductionist hermeneutics of interpretation. Freud attempted to promulgate the theory that the oceanic feeling

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[94] Ibid.
[95] Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 12.

is a human *construction* to which individuals *attribute* religious meaning, while himself applying a psychoanalytical interpretation to the genesis, therefore to the meaning, of the feeling. In the process, Freud stripped it of any religious or spiritual foundations with his explanatory *reductionism*.

The epistemological issue, however, lies in the penetrating points that James' essay invoked, regarding established systems of thought. He argued that the ideal of each science is to reach a complete system of truth, a synthesis of holistic understanding, and that therefore the presence of any anomaly that is not explainable by the interpretive structures of a given science is often dismissed as inauthentic or untrue by adherents of the science. Such is the dilemma that Freud encountered in considering the question of Rolland's "oceanic feeling." Freud understood that the experience of the oceanic feeling, essentially the mystical experience (as that is what Rolland was referring to), "sounds so strange and fits in so badly with the fabric of our psychology" (ibid.) that Freud thought it would be justifiable to look for a natural, psychoanalytical theory that can explain away the spiritual understanding of the experience. In other words, Freud was not using his science to openly consider the possibility of the experience, an experience that Freud admitted did not fit into the interpretive paradigm of his science, but to justify his predetermined conclusion that such an experience must be false because it does not fit into the interpretive structures of his science. The issue here is twofold.

First, such an epistemological approach rests on the grounds, or more aptly on the presupposition, that one system of thought has a monopoly on the truth and that if a phenomenon is introduced which is outside the cognitive purview of that system then it must be dismissed as inauthentic, as something that is not possible for it violates the interpretive assumptions of the accepted system. James writes that "if there is anything which human history demonstrates, it is

the extreme slowness with which the ordinary academic and critical mind acknowledges facts to exist which present themselves as *wild* facts with no stall or pigeon-hole, or as facts which threaten to break up the accepted system."[96]

The second issue, one that has already been observed in the psychoanalytical approach of Carroll, is that Freud's method begins deductively with a general principle, or premise, that essentially constitutes a predetermined conclusion about the object of study. Thus, Freud does not try to ascertain whether or not the oceanic feeling can be authentic but begins with the starting principle that it is not authentic (again, because it does not fit into his established structure of thought) and, therefore, attempts to articulate a psychoanalytical theory that can justify his pre-established conclusion. Freud does acknowledge that people experience what Rolland describes as oceanic feelings; however, he refuses to consider the option that such experiences can be genuine, attempting to ascribe different meaning to them through a psychoanalytical form of explanatory reductionism. Therefore, considering these epistemological decisions, the problem is twofold: the object of study is never considered on its own terms and the reductive conclusions about it are already predetermined.

Deconstructing Taves' Approach: Important Implications

If we consider the first issue observed here, as displayed by Freud's method and critiqued by James' essay – the idea that one system of thought has a monopoly on the truth and that any phenomenon that does not fit into the system's interpretive framework must be dismissed as untrue – it is evident that, although this thinking is erroneous, if it were replaced by interdisciplinary integration then the methodological problem, although improved, would not yet

[96] James, "The Hidden Self," 362, emphasis in original.

be fully resolved. The reason that full resolution would still be lacking is because of the presence of the second above-mentioned problem: the methodological decision of studying religious or mystical experiences through a deductive approach that begins with a predetermined conclusion as a starting principle. A critical observation on Taves' work can clarify this point.

Taves focuses her project on the goal of interdisciplinary integration. Thus, unlike Freud, she is not restricting truth claims to the hermeneutical categories of one system of thought, such as psychoanalysis. On the contrary, Taves believes in interdisciplinary integration, and thus the integrity of using various disciplines of study to pursue a greater understanding of the subject of study. The ascriptive approach that Taves uses within her interdisciplinary method claims that "religious or mystical or spiritual or sacred 'things' are created when religious significance is assigned to them."[97] In this ascriptive approach an experience is not inherently religious or mystical in its essence but is understood as "religious" or "mystical," and therefore subjectively created as "thus," by the subsequent ascription assigned to it, implicitly advancing the notion that the essence of the experience may be different from the ascription that has been applied to it.[98]

James V. Spickard highlights this point in Taves' work by explaining that in her book *Religious Experience Reconsidered* there are three presented perspectives, yet it is one – which is a conflation of two – that dominates: for Taves experiences "can be religious in themselves, they can be deemed religious, or they can be mistakenly identified as religious. Taves too often equates these last two. Though she claims to focus on 'deeming' experiences, in fact she focuses

[97] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 17.

[98] "In the sui generis model, it is assumed that religious things exist and have inherently special properties. In the ascription model, it is assumed on the contrary that people ascribe religious characteristics to things which they then attribute religious causality." Ibid., 20.

on explaining them naturalistically and as something other than what they appear to be."[99] Spickard explains why this approach presents a problem, particularly if one is advocating a naturalistic hermeneutic, as Taves is: "Taves recognizes that treating religious experience as *sui generis* involves a metaphysical commitment—one opposed to her own commitment to naturalistic inquiry. Focusing on experiences that people deem religious is supposed to let naturalism do its work."[100] However, where the issue lies, Spickard continues, is in the philosophical presuppositions that Taves' methodology makes, a methodology that is not free of a metaphysical commitment, undermining her own goal of a purely naturalistic hermeneutic. He looks at Taves' treatment of Barnard's out-of-body experience, which we observed in chapter two, to articulate the issue:

> For example, her lengthy account of William Barnard's rather ecstatic state of consciousness hypothesizes that 'the mental paradox involved in [his] visualization triggered the dissolution of self-other boundaries . . . [which] triggered feelings of ecstasy and exhilaration' (p 110). She posits that the first triggering was 'unconscious', without recognizing that this claim puts her naturalism beyond examination every bit as much as [Rudolf] Otto's claim for 'the numinous' puts religion beyond scientific scrutiny. Each depends on unexaminable entities. Her universe is populated by 'the unconscious' and by 'self-other boundaries'; Otto's is populated by God (and perhaps by other beings). Each posits a metaphysic that sets the rules for explanation, then reads the results back from the rules it has set.[101]

Here Spickard identified a fundamental flaw – a contradiction, in fact – with Taves' hermeneutic, one that could easily be overlooked. Taves is advocating a naturalistic approach to the study of religious experiences, one that is free of metaphysical commitments, in order to study that which can be naturally known about such experiences. However, by *hypothesizing* natural explanations for religious experiences that root the cause of such experiences in unconscious mental

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[99] James V. Spickard, "Does Taves Reconsider Experience Enough? A Critical Commentary on *Religious Experience Reconsidered,*" *Religion* 40 (2010): 312. The reference to Rudolf Otto's work pertains to terminology found in his book *The Idea of the Holy* (1923).
[100] Ibid., 311.
[101] Ibid., 312.

processing,[102]Taves is transcending the epistemological confines of a naturalistic approach and making metaphysical claims, which cannot be empirically proven, about the origins of such studied experiences.[103]

Spickard explains the hermeneutical dilemma in greater detail, expounding why Taves' approach transcends naturalism by contrasting it to his own work on religion. He writes:

> If Taves wants to focus on 'experiences deemed religious' without taking such a metaphysical stance, she must give up trying to explain them. For example, my own fieldwork with the American members of the Japanese new religion *Sekai Kyusei-kyo* (Spickard, 1991a, 1995b) required me to experience their core healing practice, *johrei*. It involved channeling invisible 'divine light' to 'clean the clouds from people's spiritual bodies'. They certainly deemed this 'religious', and I could certainly experience it, though I have (frankly) no idea what they were 'really' doing. Nor do I care. What interested me as an ethnographer was the meaning that my informants made from it, how it shaped their social lives, their decisions, their factional fights, and so on. These were not epiphenomenal, and they were informed by their collective metaphysical interpretations of their *johrei* practice. My inquiry was naturalistic, and it was grounded in experiences deemed religious. It worked precisely because I made no metaphysical claims about those experiences, on any side.[104]

Taves has responded to Spickard's critique by pointing to Proudfoot's distinction between descriptive and explanatory reduction, and also by emphasizing how her own cultural influences in the feminist movement have shaped her methodological approach as a scholar, thus noting the importance of a scholar's personal voice in interpreting experiences.[105] Proudfoot's distinction

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[102] This is the essential component of Taves' hermeneutic that sets it apart from traditional constructivism and from Proudfoot's culturally-conditioned attributional approach, as chapter 2 examined.

[103] Taves' analysis of Stephen Bradley's and William Barnard's purported mystical experiences constitutes the key example of this approach in her book. See Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 107-119.

[104] Spickard, "Does Taves Reconsider Experience," 312. For the work that he is referencing see James V. Spickard, "Spiritual Healing among the American Followers of a Japanese New Religion: Experience as a Factor in Religious Motivation," *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* 3 (1991), 135-156; "Body, Nature, and Culture in Spiritual Healing," in H. Johannessen, ed., *Studies of Alternative Therapy 2: Bodies and Nature* (INRAT/Odense: University Press, Copenhagen, 1995), 65-81.

[105] Furthermore, in response to Spickard, Taves conveys her belief that explaining religious experiences naturalistically does not necessarily explain them away by pointing to two anecdotal facts: that she once taught at an institution where many students identified themselves as religious but not believers in the supernatural, and that she once belonged to a denomination that promoted a naturalistic understanding of religion. Such personal and anecdotal details, however valid to Taves' own experiences, or that of her former students, ignore the important subjectivity of the perspectives of the individuals that Taves' approach is analyzing. Taves, in other

between explanatory reduction as an acceptable form of reductionism, as opposed to descriptive reduction, again, highlights that a scholar needs to accurately describe an experience but does not necessarily have to agree with the given interpretation of the experience. It is "a distinction," Taves explains, that she "internalized in the eighties at the height of the feminist movement and assimilated to a feminist insistence on the importance of women having a voice. As a researcher, I have been committed both to the voices of my subjects and to my own voice."[106]

Taves' reply, however, does not fully satisfy, or answer, the claim that Spickard is making toward her approach. Spickard's point, as he emphasized in his own field work with American members of a new Japanese religion, is that his approach was "naturalistic" because it did not offer a metaphysical interpretation of the subject but simply observed the various mechanisms surrounding the religion and its devotees, thus observing that which can be naturally ascertained. Taves is emphasizing the importance of a scholar's unique voice and interpretation, which do not have to agree with traditional explanations of religious experiences, as long as the experiences were accurately described. She writes: "Though in this book I wanted to speak in a 'naturalistic' voice, I took pains throughout to represent the voices of those with whom I disagreed as accurately as I could, even checking with them in some cases."[107] The issue, however, is that this response misses the underlying point that Spickard is making. Spickard is not saying that Taves cannot provide her own naturalistic explanation, her own naturalistic voice, *if it is empirically established*, thus naturalistically ascertained. He is saying, however, that she

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words, is not analyzing her own experiences or those of her former students who have a naturalistic understanding of religion, but the experiences of individuals who have a supernatural understanding, wherein the reduction of that understanding, its "naturalization," can, in fact, explain away the integrity of the experiences. This is the case with Taves' naturalistic analysis of Bradley's and Barnard's experiences. See Ann Taves, "Experience as Site of Contested Meaning and Value: The Attributional Dog and its Special Tail," *Religion* 40 (2010): 321-322; Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 107-119.

[106] Taves, "Experience as Site of Contested Meaning," 322.

[107] Ibid.

cannot call her approach "naturalistic" if her explanations are reached through metaphysical speculation rather than means which can be empirically (thus naturally) proven. In other words, scholars can have their own interpretations of claimed mystical or religious experiences, whether that interpretation is framed in a feminist voice, a Marxist voice, a religionist voice, or any other hermeneutical "ism." But if the methodological means of reaching such conclusions take metaphysical (instead of purely empirical) means than such hermeneutical voices cannot be called "naturalistic," as they betray the fundamental tenets of naturalism. In this regard the personal voice becomes a metaphysical voice.

The presence of a metaphysical voice in Taves' claimed naturalism becomes evident even in Taves' own explanation of her methodological goals:

> As I have indicated elsewhere . . . the term 'naturalism' is used in a variety of senses, ranging from the belief that the physical sciences can provide a complete account of human behavior, on the one hand, to non-supernaturalism, on the other. I am assuming that collaboration between scholars of religion and natural scientists will be most fruitful if scholars of religion set aside supernatural explanations, as most already do, and scientists are open to the possibility that we need more than the physical sciences to give an adequate albeit still naturalistic account of human behavior. . . ."[108]

There is a subjectivity in this perspective which betrays deeply-rooted philosophical presuppositions, as Taves is asking scholars of religion to set aside supernatural explanations while encouraging scientists to be open to the possibility that more is necessary than the physical sciences (albeit keeping to the exclusion of the supernatural). The latter point – explaining that more is necessary than the physical sciences – opens the door to the methodological incorporation of the unconscious, as the unconscious does not belong totally to the strict empiricism of a physical science but is, in its essence, *meta*-physical: therefore, opening the path to Taves' hermeneutical emphasis on unconscious processing in interpreting religious

[108] Ibid., 322, n. 2.

experiences, constituting a metaphysical commitment. The former point, however, explaining that scholars of religion should set aside supernatural explanations, closes the door to other metaphysical considerations, thus making a case for one form of metaphysics against others in a hermeneutic whose ontological subjectivity betrays the deontological expectancy of a purely naturalistic perspective. This is the case not necessarily as a result of the unconscious processing that is at the center of Taves' hermeneutic, but because Taves takes it a step further and associates the unconscious not simply with the processing of experience but also with *the ontological roots of experience*: once the unconscious becomes the ontological key toward explaining the source of a phenomenon we are no longer dealing with naturalistic, meaning purely empirical, claims but those that, on the other hand, are rooted in philosophical presuppositions.[109]

Spickard is not the only scholar who has pointed to philosophical motivations in Taves' approach. Finbarr Curtis argues that "Taves and other proponents of cognitive approaches to

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[109] Taves' analysis of Bradley's and Barnard's experiences speaks well to this reality. While Taves is able to naturalistically analyze unintentional behavior and tacit thoughts in their behavior – unconscious processing – she goes further by hypothesizing ontological claims to the sources of their experiences as being something other than what they believe. A great example of such metaphysical methodology is also seen in a recent documentary on Joan of Arc which attempts to explain the purported mystical experiences that Joan reported, both her locutions and visions, in naturalistic ways. Not being able to dismiss Joan's experiences through a pathological explanation, given the fact that there is no trace of a history of insanity in Joan's life, scholars in the documentary turn to the unconscious in order to find a "natural" explanation for Joan's life. Explaining that Joan came from a medieval religious culture wherein claims of visionary and mystical experiences were not scarce, the documentary concludes that Joan was heavily influenced by her surrounding culture to the point that she did hear voices and see visions, as culturally-influenced phenomena stemming from the unconscious. Therefore, Joan's voices and visions, according to the documentary, came not from God but from her unconscious mind. What is noteworthy is that the experienced phenomena – the voices and visions – are not denied; what is denied are *the ontological origins*, as supernatural experiences coming from God, of the phenomena in favor of another metaphysical explanation in the form of the unconscious. This, observed superficially, can be construed as a "natural" explanation of phenomena which the subject (Joan of Arc) understood as supernatural. Yet, examined carefully, it becomes evident that the given explanation is not reached through empirically-established, natural means but is, in fact, an unproven, and therefore speculated, claim of the metaphysical origins of the phenomena, speaking more to the philosophical presuppositions of those making the arguments than to the ontological essence of Joan of Arc's experiences. See documentary, *Mystery Files: Joan of Arc* (Smithsonian Channel, 2010), directed by Kate Haddock, narrated by Brian Dennehy; for Taves' unconscious processing of Bradley and Barnard's experiences, see Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 104-111.

religious studies fashion a kind of secular praxis in which breaking taboos is a crucial attribute of scholarly integrity and intellectual heroism."[110] Essentially, Curtis sees an underlying agenda in play which, under the guise of advancing "scholarly integrity" and displaying an "intellectual heroism" is, in fact, promoting a secular ideology through its hermeneutical methodology. Curtis is especially critical of how Taves' approach calls for the violation of *sui generis* taboos—in her promotion of an ascriptive model that tends toward explanatory reductionism in interpreting religious experiences—that, in his view, transcends the boundaries of objective scholarship through ideological motives.[111] "In calling scholars to violate taboos, Taves alludes to social and institutional ambitions that reach beyond the methodological guidelines for cognitive research."[112] The critique that Curtis is voicing here reads like an inversion of Proudfoot's critique, examined in chapter two, of *sui generis* thinkers who, through "protective strategies," Proudfoot argued, defend religious sensibilities against critical scholarship: Proudfoot, therefore, identifying an ideological component in their hermeneutical goals. Curtis points to scholars on the other side of the ideological spectrum and, instead of seeing an objective sphere of secular neutrality in their hermeneutical positioning, identifies the presence of hermeneutical assumptions championing another – although, perhaps more subtle – ideological agenda.[113]

Timothy Fitzgerald similarly notes ideological components, even in Taves' call for interdisciplinary integration between social and natural sciences in studying religion, which in his view undermines a sense of objectivity with its one-sided emphasis. He notes that Taves'

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[110] Finbarr Curtis, "Ann Taves's *Religious Experience Reconsidered* is a Sign of a Global Apocalypse that will Kill Us All," *Religion* 40 (2010), 288.
[111] Ibid., Curtis, 289; Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 34-35.
[112] Curtis, 289.
[113] More on this will be observed in the following section with a brief overview of the work of John Milbank, who identifies the notion of secular neutrality as a mythos of modern thought. Proudfoot's very critique of *sui generis* thinkers as operating under a "protective strategy," and the goal of challenging such a framework, would in Curtis' logic constitute an ideological motive on Proudfoot's part, as he sees in Taves in the advocacy to violate *sui generis* taboos. For his section on "protective strategies" see Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 199-208.

"discussion forges an alliance with those scientists in biological and psychological disciplines who, from their own assumed standpoint of natural and secular knowledge, themselves have a strong investment in discourses on religion and the supernatural."[114] Fitzgerald is arguing that one cannot simply critique religious perspectives without considering the other side of the ideological spectrum, the secular, from which the critique originates. "Taves seems uninterested in the secular positionality of the scientists and their research agendas. Nor, for that matter, does she look at her own positionality. I suggest that any critique of 'religion' as a modern category must simultaneously be a critique of the non-religious secular as the other half of one ideological discourse." He expounds on the issue in detail:

> The implication of Taves' text seems to be that scientists who investigate 'religious' phenomena such as special experiences are not themselves engaged in following a special path to a special goal of knowledge, a path imbued with ideals and values, surrounded by prohibitions and taboos, predicated on some very basic metaphysical constructions, and developed within a historically longer term ideological project of progressive liberation from existing conditions of ignorance and superstition. Whatever individual scientists may believe motivates them as individuals at conscious or unconscious levels, their work is located in a historically constructed ideological domain of enlightenment rationality and universal progress.[115]

Taves, in response, has written that she agrees "with Fitzgerald that we can't understand things deemed religious in isolation."[116] Taves highlights a section in Fitzgerald's article wherein he emphasizes justice, courts, and judicial procedures as having specialness in value that is analogous to religion, and agrees with his point that the domain of science, and particularly the practices and goals of scientists, should be treated with the same analysis that spiritual and religious paths receive, thus doing justice to a holistic analysis of a religious-secular binary.[117]

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[114] Timothy Fitzgerald, "'Experiences Deemed Religious': Radical Critique or Temporary Fix? Strategic Ambiguity in Ann Taves' Religious Experience Reconsidered," *Religion* 40 (2010): 297.
[115] Ibid., 298.
[116] Taves, "Experience as Site of Contested Meaning," 321.
[117] Ibid.

However, Taves completely ignores a very important section in Fitzgerald's article, providing no adequate response to it, which gets to a deeper dimension of what Fitzgerald means in terms of providing a holistic critique of a religious-secular binary, particularly in acknowledging the ideological presuppositions that are embedded in a secular/naturalist perspective that says more than can be empirically established.[118]

Specifically, like Spickard, Fitzgerald is very skeptical about the assumptions that Taves' analysis of Barnard's out-of-body experience makes. Fitzgerald explains that he feels "a strong empathy with Barnard's dilemma. . . . I do not doubt that something of profound significance happened which retrospectively has been classified as 'religious'."[119] The dilemma, however, according to Fitzgerald, is how to convey such an extraordinary experience within the conceptually limited confines of language without distorting the essence of the experience.[120] Like Spickard, Fitzgerald sees a problem with Taves' ontologically-laden analysis that is able to look at a unique experience as Barnard's and claim that it is not religious but could, through a naturalistic inquiry, be explained naturally. Such a conclusion, according to Fitzgerald, extends beyond what can be scientifically examined, pointing to the ideological undercurrent that encapsulates the perspective.[121] He points to Taves' goal of extending the work performed by scholars in attributional theory that, as Taves writes, "looked at meaning making in relation to

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[118] Fitzgerald, "'Experiences Deemed Religious'," 299.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Fitzgerald explains that the very concept "experience" is problematic in speaking of Barnard's out-of-body experience, as in "ordinary English an experience implies a subject and an object of experience, yet his testimony strains against the boundaries" (ibid., 299). While a valid point in terms of identifying the often apophatic nature of such experiences like Barnard's, as transcending adequate linguistic conceptualization, perhaps Fitzgerald is over-playing this point. As was highlighted in chapter 1, mystical experiences have generally been designated into two general locations: either as being unitive to the point that self-other boundaries are completely annihilated or being unitive while still maintaining degrees of a self-other distinction, as is often the case in visionary and apparitional experiences (the experiencing subject being distinct from the object of the vision/apparition). Barnard's altered state of consciousness seems aptly located within the former category of a unitive *experience* that transcended self-other boundaries.
[121] Ibid., 299.

the entire range of life events in order to explain when and why events are attributed to religious as opposed to non-religious causes."[122] Fitzgerald explains that "this distinction itself already seems to have been imposed 'top down' rather than 'bottom up' because it is difficult to see how one can derive a concept of 'religion' or 'nature' from research on brain processes."[123] He expounds: "I am not questioning the power of the models which psychologists and natural scientists use. . . . What I am suggesting is that the models of natural scientists are themselves configured within the wider discourses that construct the distinction in the first place."[124] Thus:

> It would be one thing to investigate reports of *special* 'experiences', something which has been done historically and, within the terms of its own criteria, authoritatively by the Catholic church-state, for example. But I cannot see how, to classify them as 'religious' as distinct from 'non- religious,' can be part of the data derived from tracking brain functions. It is the utilization of a modern Anglophone scheme of classification which itself functions in a wider ideological context of power. It seems to me that the distinction between religious and secular or natural causes cannot itself be derived from any amount of scientific observation or experiment. There seems to be an in-built circularity where the natural sciences investigate in terms of categories which are already implicated in their own self-designation.[125]

Particularly striking is Fitzgerald's claim that, in his view, it appears that the distinction between religious, secular, or natural causes "cannot be derived from any amount of scientific observation or experiment."[126] Fitzgerald's claim here, in critiquing Taves' approach, possesses both merit and shortcoming. On the one hand, Taves would partially agree with Fitzgerald in terms of explaining that an experience cannot be authentically identified as "religious" if one is analyzing the experience from an etic perspective, meaning outside of the tradition (such as Catholicism, with its own criteria for evaluation) from which the purported theological content of

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[122] Fitzgerald, 299; Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 94.
[123] Fitzgerald, 299.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.

the experience stems.[127] On the other hand, Fitzgerald makes the claim that the designations of "secular" or "natural" also cannot be ascertained through any form of scientific examination. In his article Fitzgerald makes this claim after voicing hesitation about Taves' treatment of Barnard's experience. To be sure, in such an example as Barnard's experience Fitzgerald's statement has great merit; however, it may not be a claim that is as universally applicable as Fitzgerald assumes. Let us consider both points.

First, similar to Spickard, it seems that Fitzgerald is saying that scientific observations cannot make ontological claims about whether an experience has religious, natural or secular causes, for such claims extend beyond what is empirically verifiable. This, again, as Spickard agreed, is the case with Barnard's experience. An important distinction is vital to highlight, however, here in considering Taves' approach with respect to unconscious processing in regard to Barnard's experience. The distinction is this: Taves can, in a naturalistic way, make observations about unintentional behaviors and thought patterns that Barnard's experience conveys, thus record the phenomenology of unconscious processing, as she has, in fact, done.[128] She cannot, however, make the ontological claim that the unconscious is the source of the experience, as she has done, for that is a metaphysical claim that is beyond empirical examination, undermining her claimed naturalism and critique of metaphysics.[129] In short, if

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[127] Herein is the basis for Taves' discourse on the important distinction between etic and emic perspectives—which we will consider in greater detail below—in studying religious experiences, and how much each perspective can say. Taves explains: "Only emic observers are capable of making determinations of authenticity. This is simply a matter of logic, not policy. Etic observers, because they do not view the events in question as originary, simply have no criteria for judging whether a sensory perception authentically reproduces an originary event or not. Although observers cannot argue for or against the authenticity of a re-creation of an OE from an etic perspective, etic observers can and frequently do argue that a claim is delusional—that is, an incorrect inference about external reality—on the grounds that an event (taken specifically or generally) should not be deemed religious, and thus that no practice is capable of re-creating it." Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 158.

[128] Ibid., 104-106.

[129] Especially revealing in this regard is a table located in chapter 3 of Taves' book presenting different levels of explanation in analyzing Bradley's and Barnard's purported mystical experiences within intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup dynamics. Taves distinguishes three levels of analysis in observing their

Taves wants to be true to a naturalistic hermeneutic that avoids metaphysics then she can analyze the unconscious behaviors associated with purported religious experiences but she cannot ontologically designate the unconscious as the source of such experiences as such a claim is not empirically verifiable. This is the issue that Spickard and Fitzgerald are getting at, presenting a valid critique of Taves' hermeneutic.

On the other hand, Fitzgerald's claim that the ontological designation for extraordinary experiences as being religious, secular, or natural cannot be reached through any form of scientific experimentation is taking the argument too far: specifically with the claim that scientific examination cannot prove secular or natural conclusions. The example of the usage of scientific studies on the Medjugorje visionaries can, for instance, undermine the totality of this point. For example, while the scientific studies are not able to verify the purported theological content of the experiences—in that sense, Fitzgerald is correct—if they were to find a natural or pathological explanation for the phenomena, such as epilepsy, hallucination, or fraud, then scientific experimentation would, in fact, be tracing the origins of the experiences to secular or natural sources with a natural empiricism that deserves its due. That was the purpose of the studies, to see whether natural, thus alternative, explanations could be located. This has not been the case with Medjugorje since the experiences of the visionaries have, as observed, endured

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experiences within these categories: 1) What Explained [the] Event/Experience; 2) How Explained by Attributor; and 3) How Experience might be Explained by Researchers. The second level of analysis gives Bradley's and Barnard's explanations for their experiences, the former seeing his as an experience of the Holy Spirit, and the latter seeing his as a mystical experience. However, the first level of analysis – "What Explained [the] Event/Experience" – gives Taves' explanation of these experiences, reinterpreting the ontological foundations through a naturalistic interpretation of each event which, under the third category – "How Experience might be Explained by Researchers" – articulates a way for scholars to naturalistically understand and interpret, through unconscious processing, both the process and the origins of these experiences. What this table implies, particularly the contradistinction between the first level of analysis [What Explained the Event/Experience] and second level of analysis [How Explained by Attributor] is exactly the critique that Spickard pointed to: that the explanations of the subjects (or the attributors) of their own experiences is wrong compared to the "real" explanation (meaning, Taves' reinterpretation) of these experiences. See ibid., Taves, 113; also the discussion accompanying the table, ibid., 104-119.

scientific scrutiny with integrity but such could be the case with other alleged mystical experiences: scientific experimentation being used to purify religion of false experiences. In this regard Fitzgerald's critique has only partial merit.

In response to Curtis' concern that Taves is partaking in a form of "intellectual heroism" whose ideological goals is to promote a secular agenda through her call for scholars to violate taboos, Taves has replied that she does not think that her call is a form of secular heroism because she does not believe that taboos are strictly religious: thus their violation (and her advocacy for the goal) is not an exclusively secular enterprise.[130] Taves, of course, is correct in this fact: taboos are not exclusively religious and, therefore, their violation is not exclusively secular. However, this response may be an unfair generalization of Curtis' point, as Curtis' article states: "I will argue that many of the prominent advocates of the cognitive science of religion are arguing for more than just a new subfield of religious studies. . . . In particular, *cognitive approaches to religion* draw their rhetorical force from their participation in a critique of whatever institutional boundaries and limits are perceived to restrict secular freedom."[131] This concentration of Curtis', specifically on the institutional aims of many cognitive approaches to religion, leads him to an interest "in how Taves and other proponents of cognitive approaches to religious studies fashion a kind of secular praxis in which breaking taboos is a crucial attribute of scholarly integrity and intellectual heroism."[132] In other words, Curtis is not denying the fact that taboos are not strictly religious and their violation, therefore, not an entirely secular enterprise; he is, however, specifically concentrating on cognitive approaches *to religion* (as Taves' work is pursuing) whose underlying goal of violating *sui generis* taboos he sees as an attribute of an

[130] Taves, "Experience as Site of Contested Meaning," 322.
[131] Curtis, "Ann Taves's *Religious Experience Reconsidered*," 289; emphasis mine.
[132] Ibid.

ideologically inspired, secular heroism. This is not a negation of the existing universalism of taboos (beyond the religious), but a specific concentration on the call to violate taboos within the context of the study of religion through various cognitive approaches, as Taves is advocating in her book; even if her advocacy transcends religious categories, such categories do remain the central focus of her concentration.

Spickard juxtaposed Taves' categories of interpretation with Rudolf Otto's, showing that both use terminology – such as Taves' "the unconscious" and "self-other boundaries," and Otto's usage of "the numinous," God, or spiritual agents – which speak to metaphysical entities that do not only transcend empirical examination but that can be used, hermeneutically, to posit "a metaphysic that sets the rules for explanation, then reads the results back from the rules it has set."[133] This is akin to Freud beginning with the unproven, albeit predetermined, conclusion that oceanic feelings are not inherently religious or mystical but simply receive those ascriptions by those who experience them. A metaphysical commitment sets the rules for explanation, then reads the results back from the rules it has set.

In comparing Freud and Taves, it is important to note that the means to their approaches are completely different – the opposite of each other, in fact – as Freud monopolizes truth for one system of thought, restricting his thinking to the interpretive structures of psychoanalysis, while Taves applies interdisciplinary integration to support the conclusions of her approach, expanding her thinking to multiple disciplines. Notwithstanding, while the means are so different – opposite from each other – the general conclusions become similar in the sense that each approach is set up to lead to a naturalistic account articulated within a framework of a phenomenology of

[133] Spickard, "Does Taves Reconsider Experience," 312.

explanatory reductionism.[134] It is not a perfect comparison, as Taves' explanatory reduction does not match the all-encompassing totality of Freud's, but it is important to convey how a single intellectual system, on the one hand, and an interdisciplinary integration of a number of systems, on the other hand, can lead to similar general conclusions belonging under the umbrella of "explanatory reductionism."[135] Freud did it one way, theorizing psychoanalytically that persons who report oceanic feelings are probably experiencing a regressive, infantile state wherein mother-child boundaries are transcended for a feeling of oneness.[136] Taves did it another way,

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[134] There are, to be sure, things to be gained from understanding the human dynamics of extraordinary religious experiences which illuminate the psychological processes of such experiences, constituting a healthy, benign reductionism, without claiming to explain the totality of a phenomenon through complete reductionism. For a good example, consider the interpretations of St. Teresa of Avila's religious experiences, incorporating both psychological and spiritual perspectives, as articulated below in note 136.

[135] Spickard's point that there are three perspectives present in Taves' book – experiences "can be religious in themselves, they can be deemed religious, or they can be mistakenly identified as religious" while also stating that "Taves too often equates these last two. Though she claims to focus on 'deeming' experiences, in fact she focuses on explaining them naturalistically—and as something other than what they appear to be." – acknowledges that Taves' reduction is not all-encompassing while, at the same time, stressing that that her reduction does lean toward an all-encompassing proclivity. Spickard, "Does Taves Reconsider Experience," 312.

[136] It is important to note that Freud's contribution here is not without merit, but displays an intriguing insight, particularly in regard to the depths that a psychology of sublimation may offer to an understanding of certain extraordinary religious experiences. This becomes evident when considering how prominently mother-infant imagery, especially the act of lactation as a source providing spiritual nourishment, has been used in both Christian mystical literature and art, having strong foundations in the Song of Songs. Further complementing Freud's emphasis on children's alleged repressed sexual desires for mother and father, in various medieval and early-modern Christian writings the imagery of spiritual experience is depicted through a maternal eroticism—at times even displayed in a reversal of gender roles, wherein male figures are portrayed breast-feeding females. In writing of Teresa of Avila's sixteenth-century commentary of the Song of Songs, Constance M. Furey notes how in a key passage Teresa "draws the maternal and erotic together; the interweaving of bride and nursing child, bridegroom and nursing mother, one who nourishes and who pleasures, reveals how difficult it is to differentiate between the desires for food and touch, sleep and sex, between arousal and satisfaction." She quotes Teresa describing the mystical encounter with Christ: "But when this most wealthy Spouse desires to enrich and comfort the Bride still more, He draws her so closely to Him that she is like one who swoons from excess of pleasure and joy and seems to be suspended in those Divine arms and drawn near to that sacred side and to those Divine breasts. Sustained by that Divine milk with which her Spouse continually nourishes her and growing in grace so that she may be enabled to receive His comforts, she can do nothing but rejoice. Awakening from that sleep and heavenly inebriations, she is like one amazed and stupefied." Hence, it is not difficult to see in the maternal-erotic language with which Teresa conveys the mystical experience a subliminal representation of the mother-infant state of oneness that Freud invokes as an essence of oceanic feelings. However, as Antoine Vergote points out, in order "to understand sublimation correctly, we must keep in mind that transforming sexual instinct nevertheless serves to satisfy it. Otherwise, sublimation would be equivalent to repression, and this is a contradiction in terms….How then to understand an activity that has been desexualized but remains libidinal in its very source and form of satisfaction?" Vergote sees an answer to the question in Freud's *The Ego and the Id*, wherein Freud speaks of a displaceable and neutral energy "which is no doubt active both in the ego and in the id, [and which] proceeds from the narcissistic

theorizing through the combination of various sciences and ideas, such as visualization, imagination, self-suggestion, unconsciously induced states of altered consciousness, that

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store of the libido—that it is desexualized Eros." Vergote further quotes Freud: "If this displaceable energy is desexualized libido it may also be described as *sublimated* energy; for it would still retain the main purpose of Eros—that of uniting and binding—insofar as it helps towards establishing the unity or tendency to unity, which is particularly characteristic of the ego." Vergote, therefore, concludes that by "constituting the ego as a unity the sexual instinct becomes desexualized while still accomplishing the unifying aims of Eros. It is this narcissistic activity of the psyche that shapes the ego and causes it to move beyond itself toward the beloved object." Vergote highlights that the specific characteristic of sublimation "is the quality of enjoyment, and the absence of enjoyment in any libidinally oriented activity marks the failure of sublimation." Here we see how psychoanalysis, specifically a psychology of sublimation, is able to provide a greater understanding of certain religious experiences, particularly in considering the nature of the erotic-mysticism that became so prominent with many late-medieval and early-modern female mystics. For example, in analyzing Teresa of Avila's famously erotic mystical experience with an angel—St. Teresa's transverberation—Vergote notes that there is "no trace here of pathology, where the absence of pleasure or joy that constitutes the sign of repression would lead us to suppose that a substitutive relation to God maintains a repression of sexuality because it is perceived as incompatible with a transference onto God. Moreover, Teresa feels no shame in simply admitting that she both suffered and enjoyed the experience through her body." In other words, here we are not seeing a woman who is *repressing* her sexuality to the point of becoming "a flagrant case of hysteria or even perversion" (Vergote) – a common critique invoked by interpreters who perceive pathology in the erotic quality of many mystical experiences – but a woman who is, on the other hand, *expressing* and transforming her sexual energy (through sublimation) into a unitive experience of spirituality. It is important to note that the presence of sublimation does not imply inauthenticity to the spiritual experience but can, in fact, imply the opposite: a deeper depth of spirituality, connoting a self-abandonment in the mystic through an interactive love of God that becomes so strong that it encapsulates every facet of the human person: soul, mind, and *body*. The body receives as much pleasure as the soul and mind through the encounter with the Divine Lover. In such a holistic perspective, wherein the operation of grace is considered, it is important to recognize that whereas Freud's insight to understanding mystical experiences – in identifying a feeling of oneness rooted in infancy – may be present in such experiences, illuminating their psychological processes, the ontological meaning of such experiences transcend their psychological dynamics (while, concurrently, incorporating their contribution); thus allowing for a fuller understanding by combining the work of psychoanalysis with the workings of grace in considering the complexity and multifariousness of interpreting religious experiences. See Constance M. Furey, "Sexuality," in *Christian Mysticism*, 334. Vergote, *Guilt and Desire*, 158-163; for studies of late-medieval mysticism, eros, and the symbolism of women's bodies, see Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, esp. 7-9, 57, 68, 121-122, 298 n. 34; and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 245-293; Also, Bernard McGinn provides an excellent example and analysis of the incorporation of mother-infant imagery as depicted in a visionary experience of Clare of Assisi, wherein – in a reversal of gender roles – Clare experienced a vision of being nourished by suckling on the breast of Francis of Assisi. McGinn explains that the "powerful symbols of this account express a remarkable reversal of genders as Clare is nourished by the heavenly milk of 'Mother Francis.' Her sense of identity with Francis as a babe at his breast helps explain Clare's practice of referring to herself in diminutives in the course of her writings…." Again, in such imagery it is not difficult to see value in Freud's understanding of oceanic feelings as a return to an earlier state of oneness wherein mother-child boundaries of nourishment are actualized and transcended, even if one disagrees with Freud's ontological interpretation of the origin of such experiences as being fully psychological without the components of grace. See Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism – 1200-1350* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1998), 65.

extraordinary experiences like Stephen Bradley's and G. William Barnard's have natural explanations that are not inherently religious or mystical.[137]

An important distinction needs to be made here, however. When critiquing the methodology of Freud and Taves, the central issue is not that their methods lead to a conclusion of explanatory reductionism; the issue is that such methods can border on leading to *nothing but* a conclusion of explanatory reductionism. In other words, many purported religious experiences may be false and the only way to understand them is through a phenomenological investigation whose procedure leads to a conclusion of explanatory reductionism. Such an inductive method is perfectly appropriate. However, this is not the method that Freud or Taves use. Their methodologies apply a deductive approach, wherein from the starting point it is presupposed that experiences are not inherently religious or mystical but natural, and therefore this leads to scholarship whose *only conclusion* – no matter what the means – will be explanatory reductionism.[138] The possibility of an extraordinary religious experience being authentic is not even considered, *nor can the possibility be considered*, as these deductive methodologies on religious experience are structured to set up research on the premise that such experiences are not authentic but must have other, naturalistic, explanations.[139] Granted, Taves has acknowledged that she does not want to say anything about the authenticity of religious experiences because, as a scholar, she is approaching the subject from an etic perspective, thus from a perspective that is

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[137] Taves' analysis of Bradley's and Barnard's purported mystical experiences does constitute the key examples of this approach. See Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 104-119.

[138] Again, Taves' ascriptive approach claims that "religious or mystical or spiritual or sacred 'things' are created when religious significance is assigned to them." In other words, experiences are not understood, through this hermeneutic, as innately religious or mystical but simply "receive" that identity once such an ascription is given to them. Taves contrasts this approach with the *sui generis* model, which "assumes implicitly or explicitly" that there "are uniquely religious (or mystical or spiritual) experiences, emotions, acts, or objects." See ibid., 17.

[139] Spickard's point comparing the metaphysical tendencies of Taves' hermeneutic with Otto's could easily be applied here with the substitution of Freud for Otto: "Each posits a metaphysic that sets the rules for explanation, then reads the results back from the rules it has set." Spickard, "Does Taves Reconsider Experience," 312.

meant to say as much about the subject as can be naturalistically ascertained from an outsider's angle without considering the insider discourse of analyzing the theological content of an experience under an emic criterion of evaluation.[140] The latter approach, tackling the subject from an emic perspective, would be the only way to comment on the authenticity of such experiences. This is a valid distinction and one whose implications we will discuss below in greater detail. However, the issue remains—and this goes back to Spickard's concern—that Taves' approach does not simply say as much as can be naturally known about "experiences deemed religious" but, takes it further, by making metaphysical leaps (beyond empirical naturalism) to reinterpret such experiences as mistakenly identified as religious.

Yet, the possibility of a religious experience being authentic can be respected and, out of an intellectual openness that does not close the door to any cognitive consideration, *should* be respected, even if one is approaching the subject from an etic perspective that cannot comment on authenticity. The Jamesian approach of empirically studying religious experiences from an outsider's perspective while respecting the possibility of the "more" in such experiences is a good example of such an approach.[141] By leaving the question of the ontological origins of extraordinary religious experiences open,[142] instead of trying to fully explain such phenomena in

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[140] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 158.

[141] It is noteworthy to recall that both James and Freud admitted to studying religious experiences from an outsider's perspective, thus an etic angle, although with very different approaches: James notably respecting the possibility that something more is happening in mystical experiences than science can fully grasp while Freud restricting explanations of such experiences to the naturalistic, interpretive parameters of psychoanalysis. As previously noted, Freud wrote in relation to mystical experiences, "I cannot discover this 'oceanic' feeling in myself" while James, similarly, wrote: "Much interest in the subject of religious mysticism has been shown in philosophical circles of late years. Most of the writings I have seen have treated the subject from the outside, for I know of no one who has spoken as having the direct authority of experience in favor of his views. I also am an outsider. . . ." See chapter 2, n. 178 of this dissertation.

[142] James' hermeneutic of the "more" is deeply indebted to his understanding of the subconscious, an understanding that was inspired by the work of Frederic Myers. Taves explains: "Indeed, for James the real beauty of Myers's (as opposed to [Pierre] Janet's) understanding of the subconscious was that it ultimately said very little about origins. In adopting Myers's conception, James left open the question of where the subconscious ended, whether in the personal self or beyond it, and thus placed *ultimate* questions about origins outside the purview of

a naturalistically, deontological way that could frame such experiences as complete constructs of the human mind, James formulated an open-ended approach that was able to be etic (exhausting how much the psychology of religion can say) without attempting to dismiss the possibility of the "more," the mystery behind such experiences: keeping all cognitive considerations available.[143] For Romain Rolland, James' approach constituted "a model of methodological humility" and provided "an example of how psychologists should position themselves with respect to mystical phenomena."[144] Given the merits of such a model, it would not be difficult to make the claim that such an approach should not be limited to the positioning of psychologists but to any scholar who is studying religious and mystical phenomena from an etic perspective.

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the science of religions." See Ann Taves, "Religious Experience and the Divisible Self: William James (and Frederic Myers) as Theorist(s) of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 71, no. 2 (Jun., 2003), 319; also for an expanded version of this article see Taves, *Fits, Trances, Visions*, 250-260.

[143] It is interesting to note that James considered the subconscious to be the place where the "more," meaning the encounter between the human and the divine—James called the subconscious "the mediating term" (*Varieties*, 457)—can take place. Taves explains that James' understanding of the subconscious in relation to religious experiences and his open-ended hermeneutic of the "more" was greatly influenced by Myers. Myers, like James and other early fathers of psychology, examined spiritualist phenomena, and Myers used his examinations of the activities of such subjects as spiritualist mediums to formulate his theories on the workings of the subconscious. Unlike Pierre Janet and his mentor Jean-Martin Charcot, thus the Salpêtrière School in Paris, Myers did not interpret the presence of a secondary self within a person—a dissociative model of consciousness that pointed to a subliminal subconscious as a second personality—as something that must be associated with pathology, specifically as being symptomatic of hysteria (Janet's interpretation). Taves explains that Myers and James, "like Charcot's rivals at Nancy, believed that secondary centers of consciousness could exist in healthy persons." Thus, by "placing the pathological, the normal, and the potentially supranormal within a common frame of reference, Myers created a theoretical space (the subliminal) through which influences beyond the individual, should they exist, might be expected to manifest themselves. In explaining spirit possession as a 'shifting of the psychical centre of energy *within the personality of the automatist*' without ruling out 'the possibility that *some influence external* to the [automatist] may at times be operative,' Myers modeled the open-ended approach to explanation that James later adopted in the *Varieties*." What is also noteworthy here, particularly by contrast between contemporary and traditional interpretations, is the development of the ontological understandings of the subconscious; specifically, the fact that a number of the forefathers of psychological research, like Myers and James, were open to the possibility of an ontological participation of the divine or a spiritual reality (articulated in the pluralistic formulation of the "more") in the workings of the subconscious, while many contemporary scholars have (de)ontologically reinterpreted the workings of the unconscious in a purely secular fashion, at times even as a substitute for the divine (consider note 109 of this chapter). See James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 456-457; Taves, "Religious Experience and the Divisible Self," 311, 317; for a historical account of the relationship between early psychology, spiritualism, and Catholic mysticism, see Kugelmann, *Psychology and Catholicism,* 165-202.

[144] William Parsons explains that for Freud's friend and conversation partner on mysticism, Romain Rolland, "James was depicted as a model of methodological humility; as an example of how psychologists should position themselves with respect to mystical phenomena." See Parsons, *Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling*, 65.

Examining these matters, we can grasp a better understanding of the important difference between Spickard's etic approach to religious experiences and Taves' etic approach, which we have briefly observed: Spickard does not make any metaphysical claims about the religious experiences that he studies when such claims are beyond empirical examination, abiding by the hermeneutical parameters of a naturalistic approach and respecting (even if inadvertently) *the possibility* of the Jamesian "more" in the studied experiences. Taves, on the other hand, attempts to naturalistically explain the ontological roots of the experiences she studies, closing the door to the cognitive consideration of the "more" with an ascriptive approach that (metaphysically) presupposes that such experiences are not innately religious or mystical.[145]

Taves' approach, thus, is different from a perspective – which we will examine hereafter as the "criteria of adequacy"[146] – wherein religious experiences are studied through a naturalistic framework, utilizing the social and natural sciences, to say as much as can be said naturally about such experiences without making the metaphysical leap (when it is beyond empirical examination) that tries to naturalistically explain the totality of the phenomenon. A benign reductionism that considers the psychological dynamics of religious experiences without claiming to explain the totality of the phenomenon is necessary as it helps to account for the multidimensionality of such experiences; as is a naturalistic hermeneutic whose aims is to explain as much as natural and social sciences can, even if it means empirically proving that an

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[145] Spickard: "Though she claims to focus on 'deeming' experiences, in fact she focuses on explaining them naturalistically—and as something other than what they appear to be." The critiques that both Spickard and Fitzgerald invoke of Taves' treatment of Barnard's out-of-body experience speaks well to this reality in highlighting that she is making metaphysical claims about the experience which transcend that which can be empirically known. Taves' explanation of the ascriptive approach of interpreting religious experiences which she uses underlies such a metaphysical commitment within the hermeneutic by deductively beginning with the conclusion that experiences are not inherently religious or mystical. See Spickard, "Does Taves Reconsider Experience," 312; Fitzgerald, "'Experiences Deemed Religious'," 299; Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 17.

[146] See Dermot A. Lane, *The Experience of God: An Invitation to do Theology*, rev. edition (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), 37-38.

experience is not inherently religious but something else. Such methodology is crucial, and it is even beneficial to religion for it protects religion from false experiences which do not merit the label "religious." It is highly important, however, to make a distinction between two approaches: on the one hand, a purely naturalistic hermeneutic which is able to reach empirical conclusions about religious experiences and, on the other hand, a *purportedly* naturalistic hermeneutic which makes metaphysical claims predominantly against religious experiences to support its predetermined, naturalistic conclusions about such experiences. The latter constitutes what Spickard is critiquing in Taves' approach, noting that "Taves slips so easily from naturalism to metaphysical atheism, claiming that religious experiences are other than they appear."[147]

It is important to highlight, as has been noted in chapter two, that Taves' approach does make a significant contribution to the debate on religious experience by incorporating the notion of unconscious processing, something that separates her approach from traditional constructivist and attributionist hermeneutics and adds another challenge to neo-perennialist interpretations. In that sense, Taves' contribution is important and deserves recognition. However, where her methodology falls short, essentially committing a contradiction in logic – and this is what Spickard is getting at – is in her advocacy for a purely naturalistic and interdisciplinary approach to religious experiences that is free of metaphysical commitments whereas Taves herself articulates an approach that is underlined, however more subtly, by a metaphysical commitment. The problem may actually be twofold. First, as Spickard highlighted, by relying on empirically unexaminable sources associated with the unconscious as ontological roots[148] for mystical and

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[147] Spickard, "Does Taves Reconsider Experience," 313.

[148] Again, the distinction should be stressed between, on the one hand, unconscious processing, which Taves is naturalistically able to do –for example, analyzing unintentional behavior and thought-patterns associated with Bradley's and Barnard's purported religious experiences (see Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 104-106) – and, on the other hand, ontologically locating the source of the purported religious experiences in the unconscious, which a naturalistic perspective is unable to do, violating its own hermeneutical parameters.

religious experiences Taves is delving into metaphysical considerations that transcend a naturalistic epistemology, undermining her own critique of metaphysics. Second, as Fitzgerald emphasized, by advocating for an interdisciplinary integration between the work of social and natural scientists Taves should take into consideration the very philosophical commitments that such scientists bring to the study of religion. Not to do so undermines a sense of objectivity by offering a critique of religious perspectives that does not consider the philosophical presuppositions that the other side of the ideological spectrum, the secular, brings into the discourse.

The Myth of Secular Neutrality?

The British theologian John Milbank has made the argument that it is erroneous to perceive the perspectives offered by the social sciences, particularly on religious phenomena, as being "objective," as if they were free of metaphysical commitments. Milbank argues that social scientific theories "interpret religious phenomena by reducing their particular nature to some extrinsic, universal explanation. Although they masquerade as objective discourses of fact, these social theories…are none the less forms of metaphysics whose hidden agenda is to domesticate the sacred by translating it into the secular."[149] Milbank's magnum opus is the book *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, which begins with the provocative sentence, "Once,

[149] Alexandra Klaushofer, "Faith Beyond Nihilism: The Retrieval of Theism in Milbank and Taylor," *Heythrop Journal* 40 (1999), 136. The cited words are Klaushofer's paraphrase of Milbank's ideas. Milbank contends that Wittgenstein put it well: "in so far as people think they can see 'the limits of human understanding,' they believe of course that they can see beyond these." Milbank continues: "The 'critique of metaphysics' which sociology, as [Peter] Berger says, claims to carry forwards, thus turns out to be a new metaphysics…." John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, second edition (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 106. For critical perspectives of Milbank's ideas see Nico Vorster, "The Secular and the Sacred in the Thinking of John Milbank," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 11, issue 32 (Summer 2012), 109-131; Richard Roberts, "Transcendental Sociology? A Critique of John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason,"* *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993): 527-535; Debra Dean Murphy, "Power, Politics and Difference: A Feminist Response to John Milbank," *Modern Theology,* 10 (1994): 131-142.

there was no 'secular'."[150] In the very next paragraph Milbank expounds: "The secular as a domain had to be instituted or *imagined*, both in theory and practice."[151] Milbank's ultimate argument, that there is no such thing as a neutral, autonomous secular vantage-point from which the social sciences study religion, but that the social sciences themselves possess intrinsic metaphysical assumptions, reinforces Fitzgerald's point that a critique of religion should be juxtaposed with a critique of the secular (as religion's counterpart) which, far from being a sphere of objective discourse, contains its own hermeneutical assumptions. It also reinforces Curtis' point that many cognitive approaches toward the study of religion possess their own ideological biases based on a secular praxis that extends beyond what the methodological boundaries of cognitive research can say.[152]

If we understand the "secular" as an imagined construct—Milbank traces the historical origins of this construct to the year 1300[153]—as opposed to the common understanding of the

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[150] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9.
[151] Ibid., emphasis in original.
[152] It is important to note, however, that the totality of Milbank's thesis extends beyond what Fitzgerald and Curtis are saying. It is true that these thinkers identify the "secular," and the positioning of social and natural scientists, as not belonging to a domain of objective discourse but one that contains its own ideological components. However, Milbank, as a thinker with a theological project (something that neither Fitzgerald nor Curtis is invested in), takes his argument in a different direction from Fitzgerald's or Curtis'; as Frank Burch Brown explains: "Indeed, Milbank argues that secular reason always turns incoherent and, in the end, nihilistic – entailing or inventing, despite itself, some kind of inadequate meta-narrative and quasi-religious metaphysic. Focusing on modern social science in particular, Milbank claims that such a science, far from evincing rational integrity and independence, turns out to be either a kind of Christian heresy or an insidious form of neo-paganism." Vorster similarly explains that Milbank's project extends beyond the social sciences, incorporating philosophy and theology: "He regards the idea of an autonomous secular sphere as a 'fiction' that has colonized philosophy and theology all too long. According to Milbank the secular is not a neutral domain as it proclaims itself to be, but is a 'disguised heterodoxy of various stripes, a revived paganism and a religious nihilism'." In other words, Milbank reaches conclusions in his theological project, as a Christian theologian, which Fitzgerald and Curtis (who are not theologians) would not agree with; however, their essays reviewing Taves' work do find agreement with some of Milbank's fundamental premises: mainly, that social scientific approaches can be disguised as objective discourses while containing their own metaphysical assumptions and that the secular is not an autonomous sphere of hermeneutical discourse but holds its own ideological filtering and positioning. See Frank Burch Brown, "Radical Orthodoxy and the Religion of Others," *Encounter* 63 (2002): 47; Vorster, "Thinking of John Milbank," 110.
[153] Vorster explains that Milbank considers "the date of 1300 as the turning point in modern human thought. Around this date the traditional centrality of the doctrine of metaphysical participation and the unity between Scripture, tradition and reason in theology was abruptly challenged." Milbank sees this shift in intellectual thought

secular as a realm of hermeneutical objectivity, then the "secular" becomes another perspective, among others, which is able to impose its own constructed philosophical assumptions onto the object of study instead of being understood (ironically, in a *sui generis* fashion) as an elevated and autonomous sphere of objective discourse.[154] Spickard's critique of Taves' method, that too often she equates the perspective of studying "experiences deemed religious" with "experiences mistaken as religious," implicitly locates the philosophical presuppositions of a secular ontology in Taves' approach, alluding to Milbank's point about sociological theories that can constitute forms of metaphysics whose underlying agenda is to domesticate the sacred into the secular.[155] Spickard writes: "Taves clearly wants more [than a naturalistic perspective]. Throughout the book, she speaks of religion as a faces-in-the-clouds phenomenon (Guthrie, 1993), in which the (postulated) human tendency to find patterns in random events imagines supernatural agents to be active in the world. Naturalistically, she can explain those agents as category mistakes. But

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as the beginnings of secular thought. He, therefore, understands the "secular" not in a *sui generis* fashion, as a trans-historical and elevated sphere of autonomous discourse, but through a constructivist lens: reading the "secular" as a historically-located, construct of late-medieval thought. See Vorster, *op. cit*., 110-111.

[154] Milbank's ideas have inspired the Cambridge theological movement "Radical Orthodoxy," whose theologians first locate the construction of the "secular" in the theology of the late-medieval Franciscan thinker John Duns Scotus, particularly Scotus' theory on the univocity of being as replacing an ontology of participation which, according to Radical Orthodoxy thinkers, would lead to a significant shift in intellectual history undermining the predominance of metaphysical participation for a newly formed, deontological philosophy of autonomous reason: constituting the early construct of the "secular." As James K.A. Smith explains: "Ushered in as a process, modernity generated the invention of the secular by rejecting the participatory ontology that preceded it" (88). Although few would dispute Radical Orthodoxy's claim that a major shift transpired in intellectual history from ontological participation to an autonomous understanding of reason, Radical Orthodoxy's historical narrative of locating the beginning of that shift in the late medieval period through Scotus has been criticized. See James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 88-89, 96-105; Richard Cross, "'Where Angels Fear to Tread': Dun Scotus and Radical Orthodoxy," *Antonianum* 76 (2001): 7-41; Luke D. Zerra, "Duns Scotus: The Boogieman of Modernity? A Response to John Milbank on the Univocity of Being," *The Cord*, vol. 63.4 (2013): 374-384. The most comprehensive response by a Radical Orthodoxy theologian to critics on this issue has been Catherine Pickstock, "Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance," *Modern Theology* 21:4 (October 2005): 545-573. For the most comprehensive critique of Radical Orthodoxy's interpretation of Scotus see Daniel P. Horan, *Postmodernity and Univocity: A Critical Account of Radical Orthodoxy and John Duns Scotus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).

[155] Spickard, "Does Taves Reconsider Experience Enough?" 312.

this interpretation depends on metaphysical claims as much as do religious views."[156] The issue, therefore, is not a naturalistic perspective that advocates interdisciplinary integration between the sciences – a noble endeavor – but a perspective that claims to be naturalistic and empirical – to the exclusion of metaphysical considerations – yet says more than can be naturally and empirically accounted for, thus becoming another, albeit more subtle, form of metaphysics.[157]

Components of a Different Method

An answer to these methodological dilemmas, one that is displayed well when considering the scientific studies on the Medjugorje visionaries, is to take up a different method

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[156] Ibid., 312. Spickard's claim that Taves speaks of religion "as a faces-in-the-clouds phenomenon…in which the (postulated) human tendency to find patterns in random events imagines supernatural agents to be active in the world" and that she makes metaphysical claims about the origins of religious experiences is best seen in Taves' reductionistic treatment—Taves would not deny the explanatory reductionism that encapsulates her approach—of Bradley's purported experience of the Holy Spirit and Barnard's purported mystical experience. Of Bradley's encounter, Taves writes: "The process was composed of conscious and tacit thoughts that triggered both physiological sensations and feelings that were explained in terms of cultural scripts. The explanation cued a cultural role that triggered a physiological response, a vision, an explanation, and a resultant thought. The narrative of the experience was intended for an audience and included explanations of the attribution of the experience to the Holy Spirit in order to make it as convincing as possible." In other words, what Bradley believed to be an experience of the Holy Spirit Taves reinterprets as a process of conscious and tacit thoughts that triggered physiological sensations in Bradley's body and received the attribution as coming from the Holy Spirit by Bradley in order to appeal to an audience whose spiritual beliefs placed a great emphasis on experience with the Holy Spirit. Of Barnard's experience, Taves writes: "It [Barnard's experience] is precipitated by the unsuccessful attempt to visualize a widespread secular cultural script (the idea that the soul/self is extinguished with the death of the body). The idea of trying to visualize the self not existing after death apparently emerged spontaneously. I am hypothesizing that the mental paradox involved in the visualization triggered the dissolution of self-other boundaries, that the dissolution of self-other boundaries triggered feelings of ecstasy and exhilaration, and that the novelty, intensity, and suddenness of this experience triggered the need for explanation." Here it is the mental paradox of trying to imagine oneself as not existing which Taves hypothesizes is the root of Barnard's experience, leading to the dissolution of self-other boundaries and the triggering of feelings of ecstasy and exhilaration. Since, as Spickard emphasized, this explanation – a mental paradox leading to the dissolution of self-other boundaries – cannot be empirically ascertained but, as Taves admitted, is hypothesized, Taves is making metaphysical claims to reach her conclusion. What is noteworthy—and evokes Milbank's critique of academic theories that, under the guise of objective discourse, become forms of metaphysics that domesticate the sacred into the secular—is how Taves' reinterpretation of these experiences changes their ontological origins from a sacred into a secular genesis. Again, what Bradley believed to be a sacred experience of the Holy Spirit Taves reinterprets as a secular experience of conscious and tacit thinking triggering physiological sensations leading to a cultural attribution. What Barnard believed to be a mystical experience Taves reinterprets as a mental paradox in thinking that triggered an altered state of consciousness and led to euphoric feelings. See Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 109-110.

[157] It is, of course, appropriate to use such a metaphysical approach within discourses of theology and metaphysics; however, such is not the case with naturalistic discourses of religious studies, for if this approach is defined as a metaphysically-free, naturalistic perspective then it becomes a misnomer as such a designation does not account for the metaphysical means by which the hermeneutic reaches empirically unexaminable conclusions.

of approaching the subject of religious experiences. This different method must possess at least two vital components. First, the method must take up the important call of interdisciplinary integration, thus avoiding the danger of allowing the hermeneutical framework of one system of thought to exclusively monopolize the study of religious experiences. Such a monopolizing tendency has been present in the work of both *sui generis* and reductionistic thinkers, influencing the scholarship of both sides of the discourse. William Rogers calls such an approach "the reductionistic model," explaining how it has been applied by both sides of the debate. In the reductionistic model, he enunciates:

> One dominating perspective or discipline assumes that it can interpret within its purview literally any phenomena, although to do so often necessitates a blurring of the richness and particularity of experience or perhaps a negation of self-understandings and alternative explanations given the same experience. Often the interpretative scheme is built from reflection on one dimension of life—for instance, valuing and decision-making or psychopathology and therapy—but its categories are then applied as though exhaustively sufficient to explain other realms of life—for instance, religious belief and practice. The example could, of course, be reversed. There are instances where religious and philosophical perspectives have been assumed to account for all experience, demanding a reductionism of other realms of both experience and interpretation to those philosophical categories.[158]

Therefore, Rogers aptly concludes by acknowledging that the "difficulty here is twofold: Not only does such reductionism imply an imperialization of one set of interpretations over all others, but it also diminishes rather than enhances our depth of appreciation," also noting that the "arrogance of such reductionistic judgments" is hardly the way to expand interdisciplinary cooperation.[159]

The points here are noteworthy, for they speak to important realities. One is an irony of sorts if we consider the perspective of *sui generis* thinkers. Scholars who adhered to a traditional *sui generis* understanding of religious experience were very skeptical and hesitant of reductionist

[158] Rogers, "Interdisciplinary Approaches," 15.
[159] Ibid.

approaches. Inversely, as Rogers hints, there is an irony here, for by abiding by a solely theological or religious interpretation (a *sui generis* framework) the hermeneutical approach of such scholars does *also* constitute a form of methodological reductionism, as the object of study is being reduced to the interpretative categories of one system of thought. Thus, what is being "reduced" in this regard is not necessarily the integrity of the religious experience, as the object of study, but the methodological approach—therefore, the hermeneutical lens—with its epistemological restrictions that exclude interdisciplinary integration. By contrast, in the reductionism of Freud, for instance, we see a twofold reductionism, wherein both the religious experience, as the object of study, and the methodological approach, with its epistemological restrictions, are the victims of reductionism. Both sides, however, the *sui generis* and the constructivist/attributional scholars, fall into forms of reductionism, whether it is singular or twofold in its execution.

While the first component of the proper method for studying religious experiences is to take up the call for interdisciplinary integration, the second essential component is that the method cannot fall into the danger of applying interdisciplinary research solely to justify predetermined conclusions about religious experiences. Such a deductive hermeneutic should be avoided in the study of religious experiences for it poses too much risk of setting up research to support a faulty premise or conclusion; therefore, becoming detrimental to progress in religious studies by risking the possibility of advancing erroneous ideas. The example of Carroll's work speaks for itself in this regard, as the author based his research on the premise that all Marian apparitions must be hallucinations or illusions, presuming to understand the Medjugorje apparitions as daily and long-term hallucinations—a theory that has, essentially, been empirically disproven as false by the scientific studies on the seers. Rogers warned that a

reductionistic hermeneutic can blur the richness and particularity of a phenomenon. This can be seen, however, not only when one system of thought is used to monopolize or, as Rogers would say, "imperialize" the interpretative framework by elevating one discipline over all others, but also when interdisciplinary research is used to support the structural presuppositions of a hermeneutic whose underlying premise supports one predetermined conclusion over all others.[160] Observing these methodological weaknesses that should be avoided, let us now consider a hermeneutic which by contrast may provide a methodological solution to the matter of interpreting religious experiences.

An Inductive Constructive-Relational Approach

Rogers, in fact, proposes a hermeneutic whose methodological approach seems ideal to the study of religious experiences; however, not without one reservation that deserves to be addressed (in fact, revised) if we are to consider the hermeneutic as an approach to the study of extraordinary and mystical experiences. Let us first consider the hermeneutical method before addressing the single reservation.

Rogers calls his hermeneutical method toward interpreting religious experience the "constructive-relational" approach.[161] It is important to note that the term "constructive" in the context of this method is used differently from the manner in which "constructivist" scholars have been identified in previous chapters. "Constructive," in the context of this method, is

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[160] In this sense, Rogers has called for the importance of "observational authenticity" in formulating a hermeneutical method toward studying religion and religious experiences. He explained "observational authenticity" as "attention to given features in object description, and a quest for implicit order and process relationships rather than the imposition of order in the interests of theoretical coherence; that is, looking honestly and anew at events, for instance, the early life of the child in response to religious images, without predetermination of structures or interpretations. Interpretative issues may guide one's questions, and may be a second step in the analysis. But in between we must observe accurately and authentically the lived phenomena." The critique of predetermined structures and interpretations is monumental as it exposes many unexamined presuppositions about the shortcomings of various hermeneutical approaches toward the study of religious experiences. See Rogers, "Interdisciplinary Approaches," 44.

[161] Ibid., 16-17.

pointing to the fact that as divergent perspectives are brought together to study a phenomenon one is able to "construct" a larger picture of the phenomenon, possibly revealing elements about it that were not previously seen. This approach fits well with the call for interdisciplinary integration in the study of religious experiences as the focus of the constructive-relational approach is to use multiple disciplines of study to interpret the subject without reducing the discourse to one hermeneutical framework, and without treating any one discipline as more valuable than another. Therefore, the method strives for a more holistic understanding by establishing a multidisciplinary approach that engages various perspectives for greater comprehension. Rogers explains that it "is unlikely that the wisdom of any single theoretical genius will be sufficient to comprehend the whole," thus advocating the need for interdisciplinary integration.[162]

Interestingly, the single reservation about Rogers' method, specifically in relation to the study of *extraordinary* religious and *mystical* experiences,[163] can be seen if we compare the approach to other approaches that advocate interdisciplinary integration. Thus, considering the methodology of Proudfoot and Taves, both scholars apply a deductive-attributional approach, one which begins with the predetermined premise that religious experiences are not inherently religious or mystical but simply receive those ascriptions. These scholars, therefore, use interdisciplinary research to support the theory that the object of study is not, in its essence, what it is believed to be but simply receives that "essence" through subsequent ascriptions.[164] Rogers'

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[162] Ibid., 45.

[163] It is important to note that this reservation about the constructive-relational method may not be present in relation to the study of other, more *ordinary*, religious experiences, to which the constructive-relational method may be *perfectly* suited; however, in light of *extraordinary* and *mystical* experiences, for whom the question of discerning true from false experiences becomes essential, the reservation must be invoked in order to avoid the familiar methodological fallacy of basing one's research on predetermined premises.

[164] Barnard provides an astute description of this approach in Proudfoot's work: "According to Proudfoot, the noetic quality of a mystical experience is merely the cerebral judgment made by the mystic that a certain experience is not solely his or her subjective creation. This judgment that an experience is 'religious' is not made

hermeneutic, on the other hand, can tend toward the other extreme of this understanding, its inversion. According to Rogers, the constructive-relational method "is one which attempts to remain faithful to the primary phenomena, while encouraging relational attention to multiple disciplines of interpretation—moving toward a more constructive and holistic understanding (that cannot be 'claimed' or reduced by any *one* of the various approaches)."[165] Rogers' method applies an approach that uses interdisciplinary research to study the various dimensions of a religious experience but, ultimately, remains faithful to the theological groundings of that experience.

Here it is important to note that Rogers' method, as he presents it in his essay, is used as a hermeneutical approach to studying various issues in religious and moral development. In other words, when Rogers speaks of "religious experience" he is not necessarily concerned with *extraordinary* religious experiences, such as mystical experiences, but applies the terminology more eclectically to denote various forms of *ordinary* religious or moral experiences. This is important to highlight for Rogers' method can be perfectly suited as it is, without reservations, to studying such ordinary forms of religious or moral experience. However, if our focus is on extraordinary and mystical experiences, then a revision is necessary before the constructive-relational method could be used properly.

When approaching the subject of extraordinary religious experiences one is essentially forced to tackle the underlying question of *authenticity*,[166] in many ways this is the central

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because the experience possesses certain identifiable, directly felt, intrinsic religious qualities, but instead, an experience is understood to be religious because the person who has the experience superimposes a ready-made label of 'religious' onto any unexplained shift in his or her physical or psychological equilibrium." See Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 103; Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 17, 20.

[165] Rogers, "Interdisciplinary Approaches," 16-17.

[166] This is the case even if one is approaching the subject from an etic perspective that cannot directly comment *for* the authenticity of an experience but can naturalistically ascertain conclusions that either strengthen or weaken the integrity of an experience.

question. Therefore, it would be equally erroneous to apply a method that uses interdisciplinary integration to "remain faithful to the primary phenomena" (Rogers) as it would be to use interdisciplinary integration to support a predetermined conclusion against the authenticity of the primary phenomena. The tenets of the constructive-relational method, specifically the equal application of various disciplines to reach a more holistic hermeneutic in understanding the subject wherein no one discipline is treated as more important than the other, are important. However, if the method is to be applied to the study of *extraordinary* religious and mystical experiences, where questions of discerning authentic from false experiences become essential, then the method should not attempt to "remain faithful to the primary phenomena" (only in the form of describing it accurately) but, on the other hand, *be open to the possibility* of the primary phenomena, as well as *be open to the possibility of alternative explanations* for the primary phenomena. There must be a complete intellectual openness to the hermeneutic for it to have perfect integrity and objectivity in regard to extraordinary religious experiences. Such an openness does not exclude any possibility as a viable option for the phenomena of study – whether that possibility is to be theological, natural, or pathological – and such an openness, by its methodological nature, is inductive and not deductive. Therefore, a phenomenological investigation using multidisciplinary means is conducted to ascertain a conclusion about the object of study, and not the inversion wherein interdisciplinary research is used to support a predetermined theory about the object of study. The former constitutes an appropriate, integral way to using interdisciplinary and hermeneutical methods to investigate reports of extraordinary religious experiences. The latter constitutes not an investigation of extraordinary religious experiences, but a systematic reduction of such cases to fit the preconceived structures (present

within the hermeneutical methodology) of a scholar's presuppositions. The latter approach does not do justice to the multidimensional richness of the subject.

One of the issues that have been voiced in this regard, as invoked by Fitzgerald, Curtis, Spickard, and the work of Milbank, is the ideological positioning of scholars performing the research on religious experiences as allowing their own metaphysical assumptions to influence their hermeneutical approaches and, therefore, their conclusions. This can be seen from both sides of the ideological divide, whether it is Proudfoot accusing *sui generis* thinkers of "protective strategies" in their scholarship on religious experiences and Taves likewise calling for the violation of *sui generis* taboos, or Curtis speaking of a secular heroism that fuels the ideological motives of many cognitive approaches, akin to Milbank seeing various sociological approaches toward religion as disguised forms of metaphysics which domesticate the sacred into the secular. An important remedy toward the matter of ideological positioning that becomes embedded in the hermeneutical approaches of scholars is to structure scholarly methods toward the study of extraordinary religious experiences as *inductive*, rather than deductive, approaches. This simple, but crucial, methodological decision can become the difference between a hermeneutic that ascertains as much as can be known about a religious experience, on the one hand, and a hermeneutic whose conclusions become a reflection of a scholar's predetermined assumptions about the religious experience, on the other hand. An example associated with Medjugorje can illuminate this point.

Dr. Marco Margnelli was an Italian neurophysiologist who was an expert on altered states of consciousness[167] and, as an avowed atheist, Dr. Margnelli admitted that he traveled to

[167] Michael O'Carroll explains that Margnelli "is a specialist in ecstasy and altered states of consciousness, author of a work *La Droga Perfetta*, in which he seeks to establish a parallel between changes in consciousness induced by chemical means and by religious experience." See Michael O'Carroll, *Medjugorje: Facts, Documents, Theology*, fourth edition (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1989), 70.

Medjugorje in the summer of 1988 looking for "any evidence that would contradict it or expose it as a fake."[168] However, despite his own pre-existent views on the subject, Margnelli did not deductively posit a metaphysic that set the rules for explanation, and then simply read the results back from the rules he has set. On the contrary, he decided to approach the matter inductively, from the bottom-up. Thus, Margnelli traveled to Medjugorje, conducted an array of medical tests on the visionaries, and reached his conclusions, which became different from his initial assumptions, only after empirically examining the totality of the events there.[169] This is in contrast to the method of Carroll, for example, who, as has been observed, deductively presumed that all such phenomena as Marian apparitions can be naturalistically explained and posited an explanation of hallucination for the experiences of the Medjugorje visionaries that fit the hermeneutical confines of his predetermined conclusion. The fact that subsequent scientific studies on the visionaries provided empirical evidence against any form of hallucination in their experiences points to erroneous conclusions in Carroll's approach. Margnelli, however, despite having his own prejudices against the experiences in Medjugorje (admitting that he came there hoping to disprove the experiences as false) reached polar opposite conclusions from his initial assumptions because he allowed the scientific studies (thus the empirical data) and not his predetermined views to guide his conclusions.

Margnelli granted an interview wherein he described the experiences of the visionaries, after conducting his examinations, as "a genuine state of ecstasy," declaring that the visionaries do enter into another state of consciousness; and, while admitting that as a scientist (therefore, an etic observer) he cannot make the judgment whether the apparitions are authentic or not, he did

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[168] As quoted in Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 207; for Margnelli's account see also O'Carroll, 70-71, and Denis Nolan, *Medjugorje: A Time for Truth, a Time for Action*, 141-142.
[169] Sullivan, 207-208; O'Carroll, 70-71; Nolan, 141-142.

acknowledge that "we were certainly in the presence of an extraordinary phenomenon."[170] These conclusions were much different from Margnelli's initial, *a priori* judgments about the phenomenon in Medjugorje, and they speak volumes to the importance of an *inductive* method in studying such experiences, especially when considering the contrast to the deductive approaches of other scholars, like Carroll with Marian apparitions or Freud with "oceanic feelings," where the conclusions are already predetermined and one is seeking results that can satisfy the hermeneutical confines of those conclusions. The benefits of an inductive constructive-relational approach are many. Let us examine how it can bring diverse, at times seemingly antithetical, hermeneutical approaches together by considering the matter of etic and emic perspectives.

As previously noted, Taves makes the distinction, in articulating the logic behind the approach that she uses in her work, between emic and etic observers – the former referring to "insiders" in relation to the religious experiences that are being observed and the latter referring to "outsiders." Therefore, an emic observer (coming from an insider's perspective) is an individual who is associated with a certain tradition (such as Catholicism or Pentecostalism, for example) and can make judgments about the authenticity, or lack thereof, of religious experiences on the basis of the criteria for discernment and analysis that his or her tradition provides. Etic observers, on the other hand, "are those who do not consider the event in question as special (that is, as an OE [originary event]) and thus stand outside the composite broadly defined by the OE. If the originary event is understood as deeming Jesus as the Messiah, then Jews and Muslims (along with atheists, Buddhists, and many others) stand outside the composite defined by that OE."[171] Herein lies the basis for distinguishing between approaches that study the meaning and authenticity of a religious experience within the interpretive structures of a

[170] As quoted in Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 207-208.
[171] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 157.

theological tradition while also incorporating other sciences, such as psychology or neuroscience on the one hand, and approaches that study the processes by which meaning is ascribed to an experience as being religious on the other hand. Taves explains: "Insiders typically turn to matters of authenticity—that is, to criteria for discerning the authenticity of the experience in light of the beliefs that they hold with respect to the OE—while scholars taking an etic stance typically try to explain what made the experience of the OE *seem real to the subject*."[172] Taves expounds in further detail:

> Only emic observers are capable of making determinations of authenticity. This is simply a matter of logic, not policy. Etic observers, because they do not view the events in question as originary, simply have no criteria for judging whether a sensory perception authentically reproduces an originary event or not. Although observers cannot argue for or against the authenticity of a re-creation of an OE from an etic perspective, etic observers can and frequently do argue that a claim is delusional—that is, an incorrect inference about external reality—on the grounds that an event (taken specifically or generally) should not be deemed religious, and thus that no practice is capable of re-creating it.[173]

Where there needs to be caution, however, is in considering how far interpreters take etic perspectives, especially when evident restrictions are recognized regarding how much the hermeneutic can say. For example, Taves considers the question of how might spontaneous experiences seemingly become real to subjects. She analyzes the matter by looking at research which studies dreams and which "links dreams to play."[174] In this regard, she considers the work of J. Allen Cheyne, who "theorizes that dreams allow individuals to simulate threats and other unusual situations in which practice can improve the individual's ability to respond. Dreams thus may provide a safe space in which to test the limits of our ability to respond under exaggerated and unusual conditions."[175] Taking into account Cheyne's theories about dreams Taves goes

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[172] Ibid., 159; emphasis in original.
[173] Ibid., 158.
[174] Ibid., 160.
[175] Ibid.

back to Barnard's out-of-body experience which he (the subject) understood as a mystical experience. She writes: "Our test case—Barnard's sense of being lifted outside himself—was triggered by the attempt to visualize (simulate) an extreme situation, specifically his attempt to envision his self-awareness not existing after his death. Though his experience was triggered by informal visualization and took place during the day, it would seem likely that it involved processes of this sort."[176]

One issue is that Taves does not consider that Barnard's ascription, his understanding of the experience as *mystical*, may in itself possess some validity, considering the profound and unique nature of the felt experience.[177] Taves is associating Barnard's experience with processes that have been theorized about in dreams, essentially associating the experience with a natural process, such as dreaming. But within such an association there is an implicit reductionism that does not take into account various factors, perhaps most importantly the fruit of the experience: it changed Barnard, his life and goals, drastically, inspiring him to pursue studies in eastern meditation and scriptures and become a practitioner of spirituality. Most dreams usually do not have such life-altering results on their subjects, implying that there is something radically different about the experience which does not fit perfectly into the same phenomenological association as the components underlying a dream-state.

While caution must be expressed in terms of recognizing the interpretive limitations of etic perspectives, it is also important to note that such perspectives are essential, being incredibly

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[176] Ibid.

[177] Andresen and Forman similarly have critiqued a methodological approach which focuses on how components like society, ritual, sociological behavior patterns, and interpersonal behavior patterns study religion and religious experiences. "Too often, historians and sociologists of religion focus primarily on this approach to the exclusion of all others, as if to reduce the understanding of religion to anthropology and socio-political dynamics. This approach generally leaves out the 'felt experience' of the religious practitioner, which is similar to a deaf person's studying music through the analysis of written musical notes, or a reviewer of written recipes never tasting the cuisine. It tends to devalue the religious lives of others and the idiosyncracies of religious experience itself." Andresen and Forman, "Methodological Pluralism," 11.

useful toward helping scholars reach a greater understanding of religious subjects, particularly phenomena such as extraordinary religious experiences. This is especially the case when etic perspectives are used to purify religious experiences of false interpretations through the inclusion of empirical sciences whose contributions about the various elements of a phenomenon are able to ascertain a clearer, more holistic, understanding of the object of study. Let us consider and clarify this notion by turning to criteria of evaluation that have incorporated such ideas.

Criteria of Adequacy

Dermont A. Lane explains that a number of Christian theologians see the need to evaluate religious experiences on two different levels: one level he categorizes as "criteria of adequacy" and the other as "criteria of appropriateness."[178] The purpose of the criteria of adequacy is to evaluate whether "a religious interpretation of experience is at least consistent with a secular understanding of life."[179] On the other hand, the criteria of appropriateness, as applied by Christian theologians, evaluate "at the same time that this religious interpretation of experience is faithful to the demands of a specifically Christian understanding of existence."[180] Thus, the latter applies a theological, specifically Christological, criteria to discerning religious experiences. For our purposes, however, we will look here at the former, the criteria of adequacy.

Lane uses the work of the Catholic theologian David Tracy, who outlined three main criterions of adequacy in formulating an interpretative framework for analyzing religious experiences. Tracy suggested that criteria of adequacy should consider: 1) meaningfulness: that the religious interpretation should be rooted in common human experience, being associated with lived, universal, immediate human experience; 2) meaning: that the cognitive and conceptual

[178] Lane, *The Experience of God*, 37-38.
[179] Ibid., 37.
[180] Ibid., 37-38.

claims of an understanding of religious experience be coherent with, and not contradict, the established claims of secular and scientific knowledge; 3) truth: that the religious experience reaffirms the worthwhileness of existence and the well-being of humanity, the necessary triumph of good over evil, seeing God as the source of existence and, therefore, the basis for safeguarding humanity's well-being.[181]

Lane explains that:

> The application of these 'criteria of adequacy' should not be construed as a reduction of Christian theology to the norms of the secular world. What it does mean, however, is that the construction of theology for tomorrow, on the basis of these 'criteria of adequacy', will be spared the embarrassment of having to apologise for religious ideas that are at variance with the established findings of the modern, scientific community. Christian theology, to remain credible, must be safeguarded against idolatry, naïve psychological projections, and the creation of a new 'God of the gaps'. In an address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences Pope John Paul II points out that 'the critical spirit (of science) purifies it (religion) of a magical conception of the world and of surviving superstitions and exacts a more and more personal and active adherence to the faith.' The 'criteria of adequacy' are designed to perform these tasks. Furthermore, the theologians who employ these 'criteria of adequacy' note explicitly that these criteria alone are insufficient; they must be complemented by Christian 'criteria of appropriateness'.[182]

Interestingly, in the purpose of the criteria of adequacy, as criteria meant to purify the ideas and experiences underlying religion by testing whether religious ideas and experiences live up to the established facts of secular and scientific knowledge, we see a direct connection to etic perspectives.

Taves explained that etic observers study religious phenomena from the perspective of the outsider. Therefore, for etic observers who approach religious experiences from purely secular perspectives, meaning without the recognition of grace at work, they cannot comment on the authenticity of such experiences (as the incorporation of grace is necessary to do so) but they can, on the other hand, comment on experiences being inauthentic (as their sciences can ascertain

[181] Ibid., 38-39.
[182] Ibid., 39-40.

such conclusions in applicable cases). Thus, neuroscience and psychology can show that persons who believe to be experiencing religious visions are, in fact, suffering from cases of hallucination or epilepsy, among other possible pathologies: purifying, in the process, false ideas about "religious experiences." Conversely, as in the case of the Medjugorje seers, the opposite can happen: neuroscience and psychology (and other sciences) can show that persons who believe to be experiencing religious visions are not suffering from any form of pathology but that their experiences do, in fact, live up to the established tests of modern secular and scientific knowledge, satisfying the criteria of adequacy and purifying the experiences of false interpretations.

It is important to recognize, therefore, that etic approaches help us with the criteria of adequacy, and thus are especially useful. Again, in the case of the Medjugorje seers, the way that various sciences were used to formulate a better understanding of the experiences of the visionaries testifies well to this reality. The problem is when etic perspectives are taken too far, beyond what they are able to show and into the realm of speculative reductionism, theorizing more than they can empirically demonstrate, and reaching for natural explanations through metaphysical speculation instead of empirically ascertaining them. To be sure, it is fine, and should be considered appropriate, when an etic perspective is able to show that a purported religious experience is, in fact, something else, disproving its validity. Such an example is not a case of speculative reductionism but empirical clarification (as the topic is not being "reduced" to something that it is *not* but is being clarified to what it *is*), and such an approach is helpful to both religion and science, as it uses the latter to purify the former of false ideas.

However, there can be a danger when etic observers prematurely dismiss the metaphysical assumptions of a theological framework, the dismissal itself being undergirded by

a different (often, purely secular) metaphysical assumption. The danger is that such a dismissal can lead to a method that is never able to get to the heart of the experience because it does not consider *the possibility*[183] that the believer's ascription of his or her experience may in itself possess some validity, having something to do with the essence of the experience. In such a case, one form of metaphysics (theological) is dismissed for another (purely secular), as Milbank and others would contend. There is in certain experiences – again, the example of Medjugorje speaks well to this reality – that something "more" which science, and therefore a completely etic perspective, cannot fully account for in terms of explanation. Essentially, what is necessary is to combine etic and emic approaches for a more holistic method and, consequently, understanding of such subjects. This leads to a constructive-relational approach. Such an approach does not exclude the possibility of grace (respecting the Jamesian "more" in religious experiences), therefore the possibility of a theological explanation, while incorporating each and every perspective (thus both etic and emic), even seemingly antithetical ones,[184] that can help ascertain a more complete and rich understanding of the subject of study.

The Constructive-Relational Approach in Medjugorje

It is important to recognize that the approach of the various scientific teams that investigated the Medjugorje visionaries did fit into the structural guidelines of the intellectually open, constructive-relational method proposed here. Consider Dr. Henri Joyeux's French team. Dr. Joyeux admitted, after reading René Laurentin's book on Medjugorje, that he and his

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[183] I highlight these words to emphasize the distinction between etic observers that would be open to emic possibilities and those, on the other hand, who would dismiss emic interpretations as untenable, stressing here the hermeneutical dangers of the latter perspective, as already seen in the completely reductive methodologies conveyed by various scholars referenced in this dissertation—as opposed to a healthier, benign reductionism which identifies psychological and human dynamics in religious phenomena while leaving the door open to the possibility of spiritual and theological components as well.

[184] This is not to say that etic and emic perspectives are, or have to be, antithetical, but is simply commenting on the holistic nature of the constructive-relational method as an approach that can bring historically antithetical disciplines together to form a better understanding of the phenomena of study.

colleagues were intrigued "but not convinced."[185] Yet, they decided to travel to Medjugorje and draw their conclusions *after* conducting their scientific examinations. Thus, from the very beginning no predetermined presuppositions were made by the French doctors as to whether the experiences of the visionaries are authentic or not; the question, on the other hand, was left open, displaying an intellectual integrity that did not, from the threshold, fall into ideological filters of preconceived interpretation or determinism. This intellectual openness was further followed by an execution of constructive-relational methodology in the sense of bringing a number of disciplines, and therefore a diversity of doctors and scientists, together to investigate the various elements of the phenomenon in order to reach a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the experiences of the visionaries.

The same constructive-relational methodology was used in the previous chapter by examining the various, interdisciplinary studies conducted on the visionaries by the different scientific teams; and also by conveying "cross-perspectival interaction without imperializing the categories and methodological demands of one discipline or perspective over another; that is, a commitment to cooperative interaction. . . ."[186] These words are from Rogers, who – in regard to the constructive-relational method – accentuated not only the importance of multidisciplinary methodology but also of incorporating a cooperative interaction between the various disciplines whose individual components (or contributions) can help to construct a fuller picture of the phenomenon of study. Such a method was especially evident in the way that the EEG tests and the algometer testing on the Medjugorje visionaries were combined. The latter was able to show by itself that the visionaries are impervious to pain during their apparitions. However, combining the algometer results with the EEG tests an even deeper understanding of the phenomenon was

[185] Joyeux and Laurentin, *Etudes scientifiques et médicales*, 67.
[186] Rogers, "Interdisciplinary Approaches," 44.

reached as the EEG results showed that the visionaries enter a state of consciousness that is hyper-awake, a state where one would especially be vulnerable to pain: showing a paradox that is scientifically unexplainable when considering the algometer results. This scientifically-inexplicable paradox of being impervious to pain during a state of hyper-wakefulness points, first and foremost, to the exceptional uniqueness of the altered state of consciousness that the visionaries experience during their apparitions, but it also points to the strength of constructive-relational methodology in the way that the integration of two disciplines allowed deeper understanding of the rare phenomenon that the visionaries encounter.

The central component of the constructive-relational method, that of applying cross-perspective interaction between multiple disciplines to reach a fuller understanding of the subject, was especially seen in the way that the various studies from the diverse scientific teams were analyzed in the previous chapter in juxtaposition with one another. Constructive-relational methodology is perceivable in the approach that the scientific teams took in studying every component regarding the visionaries' experiences through a multidisciplinary approach: the daily psychological stability of the visionaries; the neuroscientific component of measuring brain-wave activity during their apparitions; the ocular and visual functions to test the integrity of the altered state of consciousness; computerized polygraph examinations that were able to contrast the heart-beat activity and nervous systems of the visionaries during an apparition state and a state of hypnosis, distinguishing between the two; electro-cardiograph tests examining heart-rate activity; the algometer tests measuring the seers' sensitivity to pain before and during the apparition; etc. In other words, a remarkable degree of multidisciplinary integration was applied in an inductive manner to reach a number of empirically observable, intelligent conclusions about the extraordinary religious experiences of the visionaries, eliminating a number of

alternative, natural and pathological, explanations for the apparitions and, therefore, narrowing down the viable possibilities that can be used as explanations for the phenomena in Medjugorje.

Summary

In considering recent scholarship that has examined studies between spirituality and neuroscience the case of Medjugorje remains unique, albeit less known in academia. It is unique because of the nature of the experiences that the visionaries report as experiences that are spontaneous and visionary in character. Neuroscience has been used to study other, more ordinary, states such as cultivated states of prayer, meditation, or self-induced "religious experiences" which, under closer scrutiny, appear less than impressive such as Carmelite nuns being asked to remember the most powerful mystical experiences of their lives (essentially an exercise in memory, suggestion, and imagination), or German Evangelicals being asked to induce a spiritual state through the reading and recitation of biblical psalms. In contrast, the religious experiences that the Medjugorje seers report are not ordinary but *extraordinary*; they are not cultivated or self-induced through prayer, meditation, or imagination, but spontaneous, and their alleged content – as purported apparitions of the Mother of God – possess a dimension and gravity that simpler, cultivated experiences lack, presenting a very different case study for neuroscience.

The studies on the visionaries also make significant contributions to discourses on religious experiences, particularly in challenging hermeneutics of an all-encompassing reductionism. There has been much scholarship that has tried to denigrate the purported extraordinary religious experiences of mystics and visionaries through such diagnoses as epileptic-seizures, hysteria, obsessional neurosis, or various hallucinations; hermeneutical trends that both James and Underhill were very critical of. The experiences of the Medjugorje visionaries present an exception to this reductionist rule, however, and a substantial challenge to

its universal applicability, as the visionaries have been tested for all such conditions and symptoms and have been found to be healthy and free of all psychopathological diagnoses and interpretations. In this regard, the scientific studies on the visionaries allow us to make hermeneutical judgments about proper methods of interpreting religious experiences. Epistemological issues are in play here. James wrote that many academic disciplines dismiss as untrue or as absurd certain subjects that do not fit into the interpretive structures of their intellectual systems, in essence into their epistemologies. He emphasized that mystical phenomena, listing apparitions as one example, have especially been subjected to this dismissive and ideological treatment. The work of Freud, James' contemporary in psychology, speaks well to this reality. Freud struggled with the idea of mystical experiences (or, the "oceanic feeling"), admitting that such phenomena do not fit well into the fabric of his psychology—thus, his established epistemological system—and searching, therefore, for a natural way to explain such phenomena through psychoanalytical phenomenology. Freud's methodological shortcoming, in this regard, was twofold.

First, he treated one discipline as having a monopoly on the truth, as if anything that does not fit into the interpretive structures of that discipline must be untrue. Second, his method began deductively with a general premise or principle which constituted a predetermined conclusion about the object of study. In other words, Freud's methodological approach did not possess an intellectual openness that was willing to consider whether mystical experiences can or cannot be true. On the contrary, his method began with the presupposition that such experiences are not true, but need to be interpreted in natural, specifically psychoanalytical, terminology to be understood for what they are: regressive thinking into an infantile state that, at its origins, has a psychological (rather than transcendent) genesis. Freud's approach, in explaining that mystical

experiences fit so badly into the fabric of his psychology that it is justifiable to try to attempt a psychoanalytical explanation for their presence, is an approach that can lead to *nothing but* a conclusion of explanatory reductionism, thus closing the doors, from the very beginning, to any other possibility of interpretation.

While Freud's methodological shortcoming toward approaching extraordinary religious experiences was twofold, comparing his approach to that of Taves it becomes evident that even if the methodological approach was singular in its weakness it would still undermine the intellectual integrity of the hermeneutical approach. It is noteworthy that Freud and Taves apply two distinctive means in their methodologies – Freud using one discipline to monopolize the truth behind religious experiences while Taves applying interdisciplinary integration – and yet both scholars reach similar ends in the sense of coming to the conclusion of explanatory reductionism. It is important, however, to make the distinction that the central issue here is not that their methods lead to explanatory reductionism but that their methods can boarder on the tendency to lead to *nothing but* explanatory reductionism and thus restricting the possibilities of understanding regarding religious experiences.[187]

Attributional and constructivist scholars are right to criticize resistance to interdisciplinary integration in the study of religious experiences, as has historically been present in *sui generis* approaches. Scholars who have criticized the *sui generis* model have attempted to present their attributional and constructive approaches as better hermeneutical alternatives, for such approaches incorporate the importance of interdisciplinary integration instead of categorizing religious experiences into an elite class of study that transcends interdisciplinary

[187] Again, this would be a fact with Freud, although a tendency with Taves; as Spickard pointed out referring to the three perspectives in Taves' work: experiences can be religious, they can be deemed religious, and they can be mistakenly categorized as religious—Taves having the tendency of combining and emphasizing the latter two.

attention. Such thinkers are correct in criticizing resistance to interdisciplinary integration in the study of religious experiences. However, it is important to recognize that such resistance can be seen in both classical perennialists who adhered to the *sui generis* model in trying to uphold an exclusive integrity for religious experiences and, on the other hand, it can also be seen in thinkers who tend toward critically reductionistic hermeneutics like Freud who adhered to one system of thought in trying to reduce the integrity of such experiences to exclusively natural causes. The opposition, or resistance, to interdisciplinary integration has not been helpful to the study of religious experiences. It has, however, with some irony, led to diverse conclusions, at times polar opposite conclusions that either advanced the integrity, or the reduction, of religious experiences.

An important component to highlight, and one which would merit further deconstruction, is the embedded ideological positioning that is rooted in the hermeneutical approaches of individual scholars from each side of the divide regarding debates about religious experience. Thus, scholars like Proudfoot can identify in the work of *sui generis* thinkers a larger "protective strategy"—"designed to seal off a guarded domain for religious experience amid modernity – one in which religious feelings would be safe from reductionistic explanations and scientific incursions"[188]—therefore, identifying ideological components in such approaches. Conversely, scholars like Curtis and Fitzgerald also point to the other side of the ideological spectrum, the secular, thus the ideological component of scholars' secular positioning, and the need for this side to receive equal critical attention. They understand the secular as an ideological construct from which religious perspectives receive much of their criticism. This is particularly the case in light of interdisciplinary projects like Taves', which combine the perspectives of natural and social sciences to study religious experiences without considering the embedded philosophical

[188] As cited in Schmidt, "Making of 'Mysticism'," 452.

underpinnings that these perspectives bring to the subject. Here Milbank's work on religion and social theory brings further insight into the complexities of the conversation, and the need for holistic deconstruction of each side.

By locating the "secular" as an epistemological construct which has its historical roots in late-medieval thought, instead of perceiving it in a *sui generis* fashion as an essentially autonomous and objective domain of rational discourse, Milbank points to the underlying metaphysical assumptions that many social sciences bring to the study of religion, ultimately pointing (like Curtis and Fitzgerald) to the myth of secular "neutrality." What is interesting, once again, is the *sui generis* critique that is present here, with the significant exception that in this case the application of the critique pertains to scholars on the other side of the discourse on religious experience. In other words, while constructivist and attributionist scholars have been critical of the classic perennial philosophy (the *sui generis* perspective) of elevating and isolating religious experience into an autonomous, essentialist domain of discourse, a space of its own,[189] Milbank is reversing the critique. In fact, he is taking it further, to a postmodern deconstruction of modernity's own *sui generis* assumptions. He points out that the epistemological presuppositions of modern scholarship possess their own *sui generis* assumptions, particularly in the mythos that the domain of the secular (its own "sacred space") constitutes an independent, autonomous realm of neutral discourse. Milbank is able to do this by using the same historicist categories of deconstruction, locating the "secular" in a historical context and tracing the genealogy of its philosophical construction and development in intellectual history as another, disguised form of metaphysics with its own hermeneutical assumptions, strongly embedded in

[189] This "sacred space" has been criticized, by a historicist perspective, as a "false category," an essentialist "illusion." Schmidt explains that [constructivist scholar] Hans H. Penner "openly dismissed 'mysticism' as 'a false category,' an essentialist 'illusion'"—in effect, setting "perpetual quotation marks around the term to signal the emptiness of its *sui generis* pretensions to universality and transcendence." Schmidt, "Making of 'Mysticism'," 452.

the approaches of social sciences toward religion.[190] Spickard's critique of Taves' purportedly naturalistic perspective, which he sees as deeply entrenched with metaphysical claims that transcend the epistemological rubrics of naturalism, speaks to this reality; as does Fitzgerald's and Curtis' points about how Taves' project of integrating the perspectives of natural and social sciences to study religious experience should consider the ideological positioning, often rooted in an underlying secularism, of those perspectives. This is not to say, however, that the other side of the debate, the perennialists whose epistemologies on religious experience constructivist and attributionist scholarship have challenged, provides a more "neutral" positioning. What is being conveyed here is the very myth of neutrality, especially in the presence of *sui generis* frameworks whose epistemological presuppositions are identifiable on both sides of the debate regarding religious experience.

Given the ambiguous issue of neutrality and the ideological commitments that scholars, whether consciously aware or not, bring into their approaches on religious experience, the path toward mitigating this dilemma should be considered in the methodological decision of promoting an inductive approach to the study of religious experiences. The example of Dr. Marco Margnelli illustrates the importance of this point. Though Margnelli admittedly came to Medjugorje with deeply rooted biases against the experiences of the visionaries, hoping to disprove them as false, he was open as a scientist to studying the events in Medjugorje

[190] It is not inappropriate to use the language of "sacred space" here, not only because of the way that classical perennialism isolated the study of religious experiences from critical perspectives, especially social and natural sciences, in its *sui generis* framework, creating a restricted "sacred space"—or, to quote Proudfoot, a protective strategy—whose essentialist presuppositions hoped to remain untouched and, thus, *unprofaned* by other perspectives, but also because Milbank—in his postmodern critique—identifies the secular as being historically constructed by theological categories in its late-medieval genesis; thus he sees the secular not as a theologically-independent construct but one that stems from a heterodox theology, possessing its own theological assumptions (even if the assumptions are based on an anti-theology for Milbank that still constitutes a theology, the myth of the secular existing in its purported autonomy). See, for example, Milbank's section on "how 'the secular' became an artificial *space*" (emphasis in original, 18) in *Theology and Social Theory*, 13-18.

inductively, which, through a phenomenological process of investigation, allowed him to reach different conclusions from his initial, predetermined assumptions. In other words, he allowed the scientific evidence and its conclusions to inductively speak for themselves, in a process of open-ended, scholarly discovery, as opposed to allowing his own, predetermined conclusions to deductively fashion the outcome of the results. An inductive approach in this case remedied the possible predicament of a researcher's ideological commitments getting in the way of trustworthy scholarship.

A proper method toward studying extraordinary religious experiences must, therefore, have two major components: first, an openness to interdisciplinary integration and, second, avoiding a deductive approach that sets up predetermined conclusions or premises as a starting principle; in other words, the method should be interdisciplinary and inductive. In this regard, Rogers' constructive-relational method appears ideal to the study of extraordinary religious experiences; however, with the single reservation that the method cannot, specifically in the case of interpreting *extraordinary* religious experiences (wherein questions of authenticity become central), begin with faithfulness to the primary phenomena but be open to the possibility that the primary phenomena may be *true or false.* It is that intellectual openness which is essential to properly approaching and understanding the richness and multidimensionality of the subject of extraordinary religious experiences.

The constructive-relational method is especially useful in studying religious experiences, as its all-encompassing incorporation, including etic and emic perspectives, is able to measure and integrate both criteria of adequacy as well as the workings of grace – the theological perspective – into its hermeneutical framework. Such a method can incorporate neuroimaging technology, psychology, and other sciences to flesh out the criteria of adequacy behind

individual religious experiences in order to measure whether such experiences live up to the established tests of modern secular and scientific knowledge, as was the case in Medjugorje. However, the constructive-relational method does not have to stop there, for its integration of multidisciplinary analysis does not dismiss or exclude theology or spirituality but is able to incorporate them, allowing inquiry into the deeper questions behind the studied phenomena by considering that which science cannot account for: grace.

Such an intellectually open, constructive-relational method, wherein no presuppositions are made from the beginning about the phenomenon of study but a process of interactive, interdisciplinary integration is used to ascertain a knowledgeable conclusion, without treating any one discipline as more valuable than the other, was especially seen in the way that the major scientific teams approached the examination of the Medjugorje visionaries and their experiences. Various doctors and scientists from diverse backgrounds came together to study the multiple facets of the visionaries' experiences, interactively bringing their results together to form a fuller understanding of the phenomena. Their studies, when placed into conversation with hermeneutical discourses on religious experiences, were able to show how erroneous certain hermeneutical methods have been. This becomes especially evident when we consider the conclusions of such authors as Carroll or Dawkins, the former reducing all Marian apparitions to hallucinations or illusions and the latter reducing all visionary experiences to hallucinations or lucid-dreaming. The studies in Medjugorje have empirically undermined the universal viability of such radically reductionist claims, pointing instead to the Jamesian maxim of identifying something "more," something unexplainable, in the experiences of the visionaries.

Chapter 5
Conclusion:
Contributions to that "Eternal-Battleground"

This dissertation investigated a number of issues about epistemological debates and hermeneutics surrounding extraordinary religious experiences. The work began with William James, a figure whose influence reappears throughout the dissertation. James believed in using the human person as a "document" of study to understand religious experiences, the *documents humains*, he called the approach.[1] James, therefore, used first-person accounts of extraordinary religious experiences to form his method, placing an emphasis on individual experience as the underlying foundation of all religion. In the case of Medjugorje, we have an even more direct and immediate example of using the *documents humains* to study religious experiences, as in this case the emphasis is not on accounts of individual experiences but on the actual individuals while they undergo their experiences, empirically examining these experiences as they transpire.

James was a person who was no stranger to the cultures of medical reductionism, on the one hand, and the world of Marian apparitions and visions, on the other hand. Mark Micale explains that in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, when major debates were arising between the worlds of science and religion, or even more specifically between the worldviews of psychology and Christian mysticism, France was a major setting for the discussion, as two major events were taking place in France which greatly influenced the discourse. On the one hand, Jean Martin Charcot was making his breakthrough contributions to the study of hysteria while, at the same time, becoming one of the first to re-diagnose the extraordinary religious experiences of the great Christian mystics and visionaries, like Francis of

[1] James, *Varieties*, 12.

Assisi and Teresa of Avila, as forms of hysteria. On the other hand, Bernadette Soubirous, the young peasant girl who lived in the town of Lourdes, reported experiencing apparitions of the Virgin Mary, which eventually led to Lourdes becoming a popular pilgrimage site and a healing shrine – this combination leading to the formation of the famous Medical Bureau of Lourdes, established to medically investigate alleged miraculous healings. Micale explains that as the great cultural debates were happening in France between science and religious experience, a few years later, at the turn of the century, "the most thoroughgoing critique of the practice of rediagnosing religious phenomena in neuropathological terms came from the pen of an American physician-philosopher who had observed both Charcot's lectures at the Salpêtrière and events at Lourdes."[2]

He was referring to the pen of William James, who wrote a chapter in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* titled "Religion and Neurology," offering his critique of the "medical materialism" that he had been exposed to in the world of psychology and medicine.[3] Evelyn Underhill was not blind to this reality either, particularly the great influence that Charcot and French psychology played in re-diagnosing the religious experiences of mystics, visionaries, and saints into psychopathological categories. In chapter one, we observed how Underhill referred to those who James accused of "medical materialism" as the "strangely named rationalists," who, she explains, have been convinced that they have settled the debate between religion and science, or between religious experience and pathology. Underhill writes that the "strangely named rationalists"

> . . . feel that they have settled the matter once for all by calling attention to the obvious parallels which exist between the bodily symptoms of acute spiritual stress and the bodily symptoms of certain forms of disease. These considerations, reinforced by those comfortable words "auto-suggestion," "psychosensorial hallucination" and "association

[2] Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 272.
[3] See James, *Varieties*, 11-31.

> neurosis" – which do but reintroduce mystery in another and less attractive form – enable them to pity rather than blame the peculiarities of the great contemplatives. French psychology, in particular, revels in this sort of thing: and would, if it had its way, fill the wards of the Salpêtrière with patients from the Roman Calendar.[4]

The great debate, what Underhill termed as "that eternal battle-ground,"[5] which both she and James (and likeminded thinkers) partook in with challenges to the radical reductionism that reinterpreted all extraordinary religious experiences into pathological categories, continues to this day.[6]

We have noted that neurologists such as Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili have questioned the all-encompassing reductionism of scholars who attempt to explain away the extraordinary experiences of the great mystics through an epileptic-seizure diagnosis, theorizing instead that distinctions between such states (the mystical and the epileptic) exist – despite some similarities – and need to be recognized. On the other hand, we observed how skeptical thinkers, such as Richard Dawkins and Michael P. Carroll, have reduced all forms of visionary and apparitional experience (for Carroll's project, specifically Marian experiences) into pathological or natural categories of interpretation such as hallucination, illusion, or lucid dreaming. This modern reductionism, seeing religious experiences as a product of the human mind (and not any transcendent source), has its roots in earlier, enlightenment and post-enlightenment, philosophy about God and religion, as promulgated through such thinkers as David Hume and later Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Nietzsche, and eventually, through psychoanalytical phenomenology, Sigmund Freud.

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[4] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 210.
[5] Ibid., 156.
[6] And, as mentioned in chapter 1, the challenge for Underhill was double-sided: the absolutism that she criticized belonging not only to "the strangely named rationalists" and their reductionism of religious experiences but also the "supernaturalists" who tried to depict religious experiences as being objective in nature. Underhill argued for that middle-ground approach which challenged the hermeneutical absolutism of each side by allowing the interpretation of extraordinary religious experiences as being both subjective and authentic.

In chapter two we observed the developments of the hermeneutical and epistemological debates between scholars of religious experience with particular attention given to the perennialist-constructivist debate, its philosophical foundations, and the deeper issues underlying the discourse. Traditional perennialism came under scrutiny, and received a great challenge, in the late-twentieth century through the scholarship of Steven Katz and fellow constructivists. Constructivist scholarship questioned perennial notions which identified extraordinary religious experiences as unmediated, universal, and as transcending socio-historical categories of interpretation with an essentialism that is *sui generis* in nature, in a class of its own. The subsequent work of scholars like Wayne Proudfoot and Anne Taves added to the debate by incorporating ideas from attribution theory into the discourse, in many ways renewing constructivist conclusions through a combination of an interdisciplinary integration with an ascriptive phenomenology. Taves especially has made a contribution in expanding the grasp of constructivist conclusions on religious experiences by considering not only top-down (culture sensitive) but also bottom-up (culture insensitive) processes in analyzing experiences; thus promulgating a method that takes the idea of unconscious processing more seriously than traditional constructivism did.

Classical perennialism, however, also witnessed an intellectual renewal in the latter twentieth century through the work of Robert Forman and fellow neo-perennialists. These scholars wrote of a pure conscious experience that, refreshing perennial ideas of an unmediated, trans-historical and cross-cultural universalism, pointed to the presence of a *content-less*, mystical experience across religious traditions that purportedly transcends the epistemological framework of a constructivist hermeneutic. Neo-perennialist scholarship has even led to the reexamination of the philosophical foundations that constructivism is based on by tackling the

underlying issue of Kantian epistemology, and the fundamental question of whether Kant's thinking has been misapplied in constructivist interpretations of extraordinary religious experiences.

Traditional models of thinking have been challenged in this debate, as a bigger picture, one whose consequences extend beyond religious studies, underlies the current constructivist and neo-perennialist debate. Underneath the discourse is the issue of debating institutional frameworks of thinking which have greatly influenced academic culture. Specifically, by challenging constructivism, neo-perennialists have challenged the dominant framework of thought that has permeated the humanities after the linguistic turn; challenging, therefore, not just scholars of religion but an entire, established way of understanding scholarship in much of academia. Inversely and previously, by challenging traditional perennialism, constructivists were challenging the (previously) dominant *sui generis* model that was instrumental in posing resistance to interdisciplinary integration within religious studies by elevating religious experiences into a class of their own. The central caution that adherents of the *sui generis* model had toward embracing interdisciplinary integration was found in the underlying issue of reductionism, the concern that other disciplines of study would be used not to explain, but to *explain away*, extraordinary types of religious experiences in light of natural or pathological categories of interpretation. The fear was not without merit, as various nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars have applied theories from other disciplines of study to reductively reinterpret religious experiences into natural and/or pathological categories.

As chapter three examined, the scientific studies on the Medjugorje visionaries are able to make important contributions to such debates about religious experience. The scientific studies have been extensive with three major teams conducting in-depth examinations within time

periods that allowed the visionaries to be tested as both teenagers and then as adults. The conclusions of the 1984 French team, the 1985 Italian team, and 1998 Italian-Austrian team have been consistent throughout the years, supporting the moral and psychological integrity of the visionaries and pointing to the fact that they do enter a profound state of altered consciousness during their apparitions that is not pathological nor natural, producing a scientifically inexplicable phenomenon.

Behavioral and psychological studies have consistently shown the visionaries to be mentally healthy individuals, excluding such diagnoses as hysteria, neurosis, psychosis, or any indications of fraud on their part. The neuroscientific studies, starting with the EEG tests measuring their brain-waves, have shown that the apparitional experiences are not the product of any lucid dream or sleep state, pathological hallucination, or epilepsy, eliminating these alternative explanations. Furthermore, computerized polygraphs, measuring different neuro-vegetative systems and heart-beat rates, were able to distinguish between the apparitional state that the visionaries enter and other states of consciousness, such as a state of hypnosis, a state of visualization of mental images, and a normal wakeful state, showing that the apparitions are not self-induced through suggestion, visualization, or imagination, as it was not possible to "reproduce" the same apparitional state through natural efforts.

Ophthalmological studies on ocular and visual functions further corroborated the depth of the altered state of consciousness that the visionaries enter. Visual hallucination was excluded as an explanation, the ocular systems of the visionaries being shown to be anatomically and functionally normal. The blasting of 1,000 watt bulbs in the pupils of the visionaries did not produce a reaction, their eyes remaining unusually dilated and their blinking remained minimal (at times, nonexistent), showing a significant disconnect from the external world. One doctor

called it the most complete "suspension of consciousness of their relationship with the exterior world" she had ever witnessed in a subject.[7] Electro-oculogram tests showed that the eye balls of the visionaries become simultaneously immobile at the beginning of the apparitions—simultaneity to one-fifth of a second—and begin to simultaneously move again after the apparitions. One ophthalmologist on the French team said that such synchronism "was so far beyond the capacity of normal human functioning that no form of collusion or manipulation could account for it."[8]

Auditory and voice functions were also tested, and the results were able to exclude further alternative explanations for the apparitions. Auditory hallucination of an epileptic type was eliminated, as the various pathways to the brain from the ear were shown to be normal in the visionaries. While the auditory pathways were normal, interestingly, the visionaries were shown to be impervious to external noise during their apparitions – a 90 decibel sound producing no reaction. It was further observed that the voices of the visionaries become silent during apparitions, the larynx (controlling the vocal cords) stopping completely, although their lips and facial muscles continue moving normally as if communicating. The normal movement of the facial muscles excludes the possibility of catalepsy, as in a cataleptic state the muscles would be immobile. The algometer results, showing the visionaries to be impervious to pain during apparitions, further showed the depth of their suspension from the external world when they enter their altered state of consciousness, alongside the pupil tests (blasting lights into the eyes with no reactions) and the auditory tests (blasting a 90 decibel noise into the ears without a reaction). The results of these tests, combined with the EEGs that showed the visionaries to be

[7] Words of Dr. M. Frederica Magatti, who was a member of the early 1984 group of Italian doctors that examined the visionaries; quoted in Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 163.
[8] Dr. Jacques Philippot, member of the 1984 French team; cited in Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 202-203.

hyper-awake during apparitions, presented a scientifically unexplainable contradiction about the altered state of consciousness they enter as a state of hyper-wakefulness would make one very vulnerable to exterior pain and stimuli.

Elements of "contradiction," or perhaps more aptly *mystery* or *ambiguity*, were also present in trying to deduce whether the visionaries are undergoing subjective or objective experiences during their apparitions. There are components to the experiences that point to both subjective and objective elements, an admixture of the two. The French team postulated that the mode of perception of the visionaries' experiences transcends the grasp of their scientific instruments. This claim was not dissimilar from Kant's argument (examined in chapter two) that mystical modes of perception would not be measurable by, or subjected to, his epistemological framework of understanding.

A lot of recent scholarship has been dedicated to applying cognitive sciences like neuroscience to study various types of alleged religious experiences. Unfortunately, very little attention has been given in academia to the scientific studies of the phenomena in Medjugorje, a subject that has been largely ignored by scholars of religion; notwithstanding the fact that the uniqueness of the Medjugorje apparitions, as spontaneous and visionary phenomena—constituting not just religious experiences but, more distinctly, *extraordinary* religious experiences—gives scholars of religion the opportunity to study a much rarer, and perhaps more significant, form of experience than more common, cultivated, or self-induced "religious experiences."[9]

[9] The matter whether all such self-induced experiences warrant the label of "religious experiences" remains highly questionable as the example of Beauregard's and Paquette's study on Carmelite nuns shows. Since the Carmelites were asked to recreate the most profound mystical experiences of their lives in their minds the exercise constituted less of a "religious experience" than an exercise in imagination, memory, and suggestion.

A newly emerging field in recent years has been the area of study known as "neurotheology," wherein the interdisciplinary connection between neuroscience, spirituality, and theology has been formed to better understand the relationship between the brain and religious experiences, behaviors, and beliefs; or, as Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause put it, to better "understand the link between brain function and *all* important aspects of religion."[10] Newberg emphasizes that originally studies in neurotheology "analyzed the relationship between electrical changes in the brain (measured by electroencephalography, EEG) and meditative states."[11] However, more "recent studies of religious and spiritual practices have utilized brain imaging techniques such as single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT), positron emission tomography (PET), and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI)."[12] Scholars of neurotheology – sometimes called "neurotheologians" – have used EEGs to study meditative states, and therefore such states have been incorporated into their scholarship. However, visionary and apparitional experiences such as those of the Medjugorje visionaries, although tested by EEGs, and although providing a significant opportunity to study an exceptionally rare religious phenomenon, have yet to be incorporated into mainstream scholarship on neurotheology, again remaining largely ignored. The fact that more recent neuroimaging technologies (SPECTs, PETs, and fMRIs) have been utilized to study spiritual practices,[13] such as meditation or prayer, shows that the door is still open for further, original research on that

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[10] Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 175.
[11] Newberg, *Principles of Neurotheology*, 168.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Newberg explains that these "studies have helped to determine which parts of the brain are responsible for a variety of neurocognitive processes. . . . Activation studies with the functional neuroimaging techniques have been employed to determine the areas in the brain that are involved in the production and understanding of language, visual processing, and pain reception and sensation." *Principles*, 169. Seeing which areas of the brain would be affected in the visionaries by their apparitional experiences, were the seers open to be subjected to further neuroscientific study (beyond electroencephalography), through such methods as SPECT, PET, or fMRI testing, presents a significant and rare research opportunity for the field of neurotheology.

which has remained unstudied: the examination of extraordinary religious experiences with such neuroimaging techniques, as three of the Medjugorje visionaries still report experiencing daily apparitions, and as their experiences have yet to be subjected to such studies. Newberg warns of the limitations of such studies, however; or, more specifically, the limitations to techniques that are required to orchestrate such studies. He emphasizes that placing "a subject in a scanner with noise or in uncomfortable positions might adversely affect the ability to study accurately a particular practice."[14] With the experiences of the Medjugorje visionaries, however, such a "limitation" would not even be a factor, for the simple, aforementioned reason that during their apparitions the visionaries experience such a profound disconnect from the exterior world that no provocation – visual, auditory, or physical (whether measuring their sensitivity to pain, blasting 90 decibel sounds in their ears, putting an opaque screen in front of them or blasting their pupils with strong lights) – is able to disrupt their altered state of consciousness, their purported visionary experiences. Thus, this constitutes further reason as to why the experiences of the Medjugorje visionaries can be a fruitful subject of exploration for scholars of neurotheology to advance more original research in the field.

The various scientific studies on the Medjugorje seers do allow us to make important judgments regarding major issues surrounding discourses and debates about extraordinary religious experiences. René Laurentin has written about the scientific studies on the seers, and has played an instrumental role himself in bringing the French team to Medjugorje to conduct the first major examinations on the visionaries. However, what Laurentin has not done, which this dissertation has, is incorporate the results of the Medjugorje studies into major academic discourses on extraordinary religious and mystical experiences, particularly modern

[14] Ibid., 169.

hermeneutical and epistemological debates and discourses.[15] This has been the first time that the scientific studies on the visionaries have been placed into conversation with major thinkers on religious experience, and the results have been illuminating.

Medjugorje's contribution is threefold to discourses on religious experience: it is, first, epistemological; second, hermeneutical; and third, beneficial to strengthening criteria of adequacy in discerning religious experiences. The studies in Medjugorje show that it is erroneous to perceive all accounts of extraordinary religious experiences through a reductive and absolutist epistemology of "medical materialism," or an uncritical rationalism,[16] as if every extraordinary religious phenomenon can be understood though an *alternative*, pathological or natural, explanation in order to fit into the preordained structures of an established system of thinking. There are elements within the Medjugorje studies that contradict and undermine such reductive

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[15] Laurentin has noted that phenomena like the Medjugorje apparitions give challenge to hypercritical trends in academic thought like rationalism and *a priori* reductionism, but beyond noting this reality Laurentin has not examined the topic in detail by placing the scientific studies within the context of major hermeneutical and epistemological debates considering extraordinary religious and mystical experiences, as this dissertation has. In addition to Laurentin's already cited work here with Henri Joyeux, see René Laurentin and Ljudevit Rupcic, *Is the Virgin Mary Appearing at Medjugorje? An Urgent Message for the World Given in a Marxist Country*, trans. Francis Martin (Washington, DC: The Word Among Us Press, 1984), esp. 11-12.

[16] Newberg et al. provide a great explanation of what is meant here by an "uncritical rationalism," going back to a number of thinkers that have been referenced in this dissertation: "When philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in 1885, made his famous proclamation that God was dead, he was saying, of course, that God had never really lived at all. Like other great rationalistic thinkers of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries—Marx, Freud, James Frazer, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Bertrand Russell, to name a few—Nietzsche regarded God as just another vestige of an unscientific past that humanity would soon outgrow. It was the great expectation of many in that world-changing generation of realistic explanations for the mysteries of existence, the irrational appeal of religion would simply fade, and God, in all his incarnations, would simply go away.

"God, however, has not obliged, and as we enter the new millennium—an age of unprecedented scientific and technological enlightenment—religion and spirituality continue to thrive. If Nietzsche and his contemporaries were alive to see it, they would most likely regard God's survival as a triumph of ignorance over reason. Convinced that religious belief is based on superstition and fearful self-delusion, they would have no choice but to conclude—as many modern rationalists have done—that humans cling to God because they lack the strength and courage to face the world without Him.

"This cynical interpretation is so firmly entrenched in the thinking of rational materialism that few rationalistic thinkers would even bother to question it, but an open-minded inquiry shows that this idea may not be as intellectually sound as it seems. . . . Evidence suggests that the deepest origins of religion are based in mystical experience, and that religions persist because the wiring of the human brain continues to provide believers with unitary experiences that are often interpreted as assurances that God exists." Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 129.

epistemologies, pointing to the something "more" (to use James' phraseology) in the experiences of the visionaries.

It is important to recognize that when considering epistemologies of radical reductionism then, as is the case with traditional perennialism, the arguments underlying the framework are also trans-historical: *trans-historical* in the sense that such arguments encapsulate extraordinary religious experiences that have been present *throughout history* and that have been subjected to various reductive epistemologies, such as those proposing an epileptic-seizure or hysteria diagnosis to universally explain away the integrity of such experiences. Here thinkers like Jean-Martin Charcot, Simone de Beauvoir, and Oliver Sacks come to mind, each reducing the experiences of *medieval* mystics to psychopathological categories of interpretation. Yet the Medjugorje studies, by the usage of contemporary scientific technology and examination to investigate a contemporary phenomenon, present a more nuanced picture of the possible depths of mystical phenomena, showing that these earlier interpreters who placed such experiences into pathological categories may not have adequately grasped the complexity and potential integrity of such cases. Here it is important to note, or distinguish, however, that one contemporary case study cannot, of course, vindicate every claim of extraordinary religious experience of the past – as natural and psychopathological explanations are probable in various instances – but it can challenge the universal applicability of such reductive interpretations by providing a scientifically investigated, exception to the rule that undermines the radical nature, even the trans-historical perennialism, of such reductionist interpretations.

The second major contribution that the Medjugorje studies make is hermeneutical. The studies show that a proper method for examining extraordinary religious experiences must have the two important components of being inductive and constructive-relational. Otherwise, there is

a great risk of methodologically setting up one's research to support false premises, and therefore advance false conclusions, about extraordinary religious experiences. This was very evident in the work of Michael P. Carroll, who began with the premise that all Marian apparitions must either be illusions or hallucinations, and developed a psychoanalytical phenomenology that could theoretically articulate an intelligent justification of the premise. Notwithstanding, Carroll's thesis, particularly in the case of the Medjugorje apparitions as daily hallucinations, has been proven to be false by the scientific studies on the visionaries.

Carroll's methodological approach was not entirely new or original but can, in fact, be traced back to the godfather of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, who attempted to explain away the phenomena of "oceanic feelings" through a hypothesis from psychoanalytical theory that could give such experiences a natural genesis with psychological origins. Freud's mistake, as chapter four observed, was twofold: 1) He allowed one discipline to monopolize the truth about religious experiences; and 2) His method began deductively with a general principle that constituted a predetermined conclusion about the object of study. Thus, not only did Freud's method avoid interdisciplinary integration, but it was also structured in such a way as to allow nothing but one conclusion to prevail: that of explanatory reductionism. The question of whether "oceanic feelings" (thus mystical experiences) can or cannot have another explanation beside regression was not even considered nor intelligently investigated. Since such phenomena did not fit into the interpretive structures of Freud's psychology they were dismissed as simply regression without allowance for the something "more." James warned of the epistemological tendency in academia of denigrating subjects that do not fit into the interpretive structures of an established intellectual system, seeing this propensity especially in regard to the treatment that mystical phenomena have received. William Harmless notes the ideological biases that James

himself faced in delivering his Gifford Lectures with the intention of taking such phenomena, as religious experiences, seriously:

> James took religious experience seriously and knew that such an opinion went against the intellectual grain of many in his Edinburgh audience. Science and religion were then bitter antagonists. And so in his opening lecture, he took pains to justify his study of religious experience against scientific detractors, whom he labeled "medical materialists." He knew that many dismissed religious experiences as either undiagnosed medical pathology or psychosexual obsession.[17]

With scientists taking religious experiences seriously in Medjugorje, using a diverse array of medical and scientific examination to study the case, the radical reductionism that medical materialism has historically advanced to explain away such phenomena begins to lose its prowess. Prominent re-interpretations for religious experiences, such as Freud's dismissal of religion as a neurosis, are challenged. The thesis proposed by Volney P. Gay through linguistic and psychoanalytical analysis, arguing the absence of an intrinsic connection between religion and neurosis in the foundational psychoanalytic literature, is empirically supported by the Medjugorje studies in another, still psychological, manner: through clinical studies on the visionaries and their extraordinary religious experiences, being tested and being found to be completely free of such a diagnosis.

As mentioned, Freud made the methodological decision of monopolizing the study of religious experience under the interpretive structures of one discipline. This is a mistake, however, that scholars from both perspectives, those critical of religious experiences and those supportive, have fallen into. Wayne Proudfoot, as noted in chapter two, accused perennial thinkers who apply a *sui generis* approach of hiding under a "protective strategy," a protective strategy that defends religious sensibilities against modern scholarship and criticism by avoiding interdisciplinary integration. This is a valid critique, one articulated by Ann Taves as well, which

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[17] Harmless, *Mystics*, 11.

speaks to an underlying ideological agenda behind scholarship that shuns away interdisciplinary integration.

However, as equally valid critiques of Taves' interdisciplinary approach have noted, interdisciplinary integration does not by itself advance a more objective discourse on religious experiences for the perspectives which are being integrated contain their own ideological positioning which should be considered. Timothy Fitzgerald explains that scholars from the social and natural sciences, whose alliance Taves is calling for in incorporating an interdisciplinary goal, possess their own investment in discourses on religion and the supernatural through their assumed standpoints of natural and secular knowledge.[18] In other words, if religious experiences are to be examined with any objectivity there needs to be a mutual critique of religion's counterpart, the secular, from which the critique of religion stems. Finbarr Curtis, similarly, does not see a more objective epistemology in the cognitive approaches of scholars who call for the violation of *sui generis* taboos in the study of religion but an ideological approach, conveyed under the guise of an intellectual heroism that is, at its core, grounded in a secular agenda. In this sense, the very call for the violation of protective strategies in the name of scholarly advancement betrays ideological goals that transcend the methodological boundaries of cognitive research. James V. Spickard also made a noteworthy critique of Taves' claimed naturalism, observing that her approach makes metaphysical claims whose assumptions transcend the boundaries of a naturalistic hermeneutic, saying more than can be empirically proven (that is, naturally known) about religious experiences. While Taves, in response, highlighted Proudfoot's important distinction between descriptive and explanatory reduction, noting that there should be nothing wrong with scholars having their own

[18] Fitzgerald, "'Experiences Deemed Religious,'" 297.

interpretations of religious experiences if those experiences are honestly described, this point does not address Spickard's main concern. Spickard's main concern is that one cannot make metaphysical leaps about religious experiences while claiming a naturalistic approach, as the underlying tenets of naturalism are, in that case, violated, the approach becoming a more subtle form of metaphysics.

Here the work of John Milbank makes an insightful contribution, particularly in Milbank's contention that the social sciences possess their own ideological agendas in studying religion that tend to domesticate the sacred into the secular, becoming a disguised form of metaphysics. Considering such a notion, the call for interdisciplinary integration as a way to arrive at a more objective discourse for studying religious experience, beyond the *sui generis* restrictions of classical perennialism, is challenged. Milbank's exposition of the "secular," as a historically-constructed philosophy with its own *sui generis* assumptions, undermining the popular understanding of the term as an autonomous, vantage-point of neutral discourse, reinforces the foregoing critiques of Fitzgerald, Curtis, and, to some extent, Spickard. The insight that these scholars make is significant. On the one hand, Proudfoot, Taves, and like-minded scholars make a noble call for interdisciplinary integration in studying the various facets of religious experiences, providing a valid critique of a classic perennial philosophy which created a false "sacred space" for religious experience through an ahistorical, *sui generis* essentialism that refused the contributions of other sciences. On the other hand, Milbank et al. are right to see that popular assumptions about the secular, as an autonomous, neutral realm of rational discourse, contain their own *sui generis* pretentions that create a false "sacred space" found in the epistemological myth of secular neutrality. What such critics are saying is that underneath many social and natural sciences there exists not only an epistemology, but also an ontology which is

in play. A hermeneutic that assumes secular neutrality is not considering the metaphysical presuppositions that are embedded in its perspective.[19]

Considering these various points, what is at issue are the numerous ideological commitments that scholars bring to their approaches to religious experiences. Consequently, there are multiple concerns that arise. Of particular importance is the question of how do we approach the study of religious experiences without falling into the ideological filtering that various hermeneutics, whether perennial, neo-perennial, constructivist, attributionist, or any other, bring to their approaches? At the same time, the concerns that scholars from each side of the debate on religious experience evoke deserve further attention. Many constructivists and attributionists worry that the neglect of interdisciplinary integration in the study of religious experience restricts our knowledge of the subject, presenting ideologically-minded "protective strategies" that defend religious sensibilities against modern critical scholarship. These are valid concerns. Conversely, many perennialist scholars show concern that interdisciplinary integration could be used to reduce religious experiences to something else, presenting not a greater understanding, but a methodological reductionism, of such experiences. These are also valid

[19] An interesting history to consider in this regard is the history of psychology. Kugelmann traces how Catholic Neoscholastic psychology came under criticism by the "new psychology" emerging at the turn of the twentieth century which hoped to abandon religious categories such as "the soul" from its domain. It is noteworthy that many of the founding fathers of psychology, such as William James and Carl Jung, considered religious questions as important pursuits for psychology while latter trends in the field abandoned such matters. "As the new psychology at the turn of the twentieth century sought to distance itself from notions of the soul, it ran head-on into Neoscholastic conclusions about the soul as a first cause of human life. For the Neoscholastics, psychology's abandonment of the soul was a failure of intellectual nerve at best or misguided materialism at worst" (Kugelmann, 69). Proponents of the new psychology, which became – the dominant – mainstream psychology, hoped to abandon the influence of religious and metaphysical thinking for a purely empirical and objective science. The question of neutrality, however, through the removal of religious categories from the discipline, remains highly debated. Paul Vitz sees a secular humanism underlying many modern psychologies which possesses its own ideological assumptions. Don Browning has analyzed the various hermeneutical assumptions that major modern psychologies hold. See Kugelmann, *Psychology and Catholicism*, esp. 32-118; Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); Don S. Browning, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1987).

concerns. Is it possible, therefore, to find a middle-ground approach: that is, not a compromise but a hermeneutic that is able to alleviate such significant concerns which scholars on each side hold? If the call for interdisciplinary integration, as constructivist and attributionist scholars have stressed, is important, then how does one partake in such a methodological approach properly in regard to examining religious experiences?

Interdisciplinary integration is by itself not enough in formulating an ideal approach to the study of religious experiences because of the ideological dimensions that scholars from various disciplines can bring to the subject. What is necessary, therefore, is the incorporation of an *inductive* methodology alongside interdisciplinary integration, as such an approach, one that is both inductive and interdisciplinary, can help to mitigate the intrusion of ideological commitments from affecting the study of religious experiences. In an approach that is both inductive and interdisciplinary a healthy middle-ground between perennialist and constructivist concerns is reached. On the one hand, interdisciplinary integration is incorporated, alleviating constructivist fears against a classical perennialism with *sui generis* pretentions that exclude the value of other disciplines from studying religious experiences. On the other hand, the danger that the study of religious experiences will become a wholly reductionistic enterprise is also diminished, alleviating perennialist concerns about interdisciplinary integration being used simply to explain away such experiences, as the inductiveness of the approach would not allow for the pre-existent assumptions of individual scholars (whether they are for or against religious experiences) to predetermine their conclusions.

The example of Dr. Marco Margnelli highlights the importance and advantage of approaching religious experiences through an inductive method. Although Margnelli admittedly came to Medjugorje with deeply held biases against the experiences of the visionaries, hoping to

disprove them as false, he was as a scientist open to studying the events in Medjugorje inductively, which, through a phenomenological process of investigation, allowed him to reach different conclusions from his initial, predetermined assumptions. He allowed the scientific evidence and its conclusions to inductively speak for themselves, in a process of open-ended, scholarly discovery, as opposed to allowing his own, predetermined presuppositions to deductively fashion the outcome of the results. Margnelli's approach merits contrast with that of Michael P. Carroll, who, like Margnelli initially, was not a believer in the integrity of the apparitions in Medjugorje and, unlike Margnelli, remained such after reaching his conclusions. By deductively beginning with the general principle that Marian apparitions have naturalistic causes Carroll contended that such experiences must be rooted in either hallucination or illusion, or a combination of each. Therefore, instead of inductively investigating the various phenomena in Medjugorje as Margnelli did, Carroll formulated a hypothesis from psychoanalytical theory that would support his predetermined conclusions. Thus, neither was his approach inductive or interdisciplinary, applying the epistemological framework of one discipline to monopolize the interpretation of Marian apparitions. The fact that scientific studies on the visionaries would contain empirical evidence contradicting Carroll's conclusions shows what a dangerous method a deductive approach can be in regard to examining such religious experiences. The possibility of reaching false or mistaken conclusions is highly present. Margnelli's example, on the other hand, speaks to the contrary reality, providing a case study wherein an inductive approach remedied the possible predicament of a researcher's ideological commitments getting in the way of trustworthy scholarship.

This is why an inductive, constructive-relational method is best in approaching the study of extraordinary religious experiences. This method possesses the two essential components

required to study such experiences with an intellectual integrity that comes as close as one can to an objective approach: 1) incorporating interdisciplinary integration; and 2) avoiding a deductive hermeneutic that is structured to support a predetermined conclusion, in favor of an intellectually open, inductive hermeneutic. When considering William Rogers' articulation of the constructive-relational method, the only revision that is necessary to his version is to change the premise that the method should remain faithful to the primary phenomena of study. This revision is necessary specifically when studying *extraordinary* religious experiences, as questions of discerning authenticity are central to exploring such experiences. Therefore, a method that pursues this task must begin without biases, which can come from two polar extremes – either trying, from the beginning, to remain faithful to the primary phenomena or, inversely, trying from the beginning to deny the primary phenomena. The ideal constructive-relational method toward studying extraordinary religious experiences must avoid such methodological starting points, being completely inductive in its approach.

The approaches of the major scientific teams that studied the experiences of the Medjugorje visionaries did fit into the structural guidelines of this inductive, constructive-relational method which, in its intellectual openness, does not presume to know the nature of the subject of study from the beginning but, through a phenomenological process of investigation and discovery, can reach intelligent conclusions about the subject after examining it. The approach of Dr. Henri Joyeux's 1984 French team constitutes a prime example of this method in action. Members of the French team read about the events in Medjugorje; they admitted, afterwards, to being intrigued but not convinced. Yet, they decided to travel to Medjugorje and draw their conclusions *after* conducting their scientific examinations. Thus, from the very beginning no predetermined presuppositions were made by the doctors as to whether the

experiences of the visionaries are authentic or not; the question, on the other hand, was left open, displaying an intellectual integrity that did not, from the threshold, fall into ideological filters of preconceived interpretation or determinism. This intellectual openness was further followed by an execution of constructive-relational methodology in the sense of bringing a number of disciplines, and therefore a diversity of doctors and scientists, together to investigate the various elements of the phenomenon in order to reach a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the experiences of the visionaries. This was achieved interactively, thus without treating any one discipline as more valuable than the other but, instead, interactively bringing the multidisciplinary results together to form a fuller picture of the phenomenon.

Alongside the first two major contributions that the Medjugorje studies make, the epistemological and the hermeneutical, the third major contribution is made to the criteria of adequacy, particularly the criterion which seeks to measure religious experiences against the best scientific and secular knowledge that is available to better understand the veracity (or lack thereof) of such experiences. The component of the etic perspective is present here, wherein external scientific knowledge is used to say as much as is possible about the phenomenon. Here the input is connected to hermeneutics, as it is directly associated with the constructive-relational method. With its all-encompassing methodology, the usage of the constructive-relational approach was able to incorporate neuroscience, psychology, and other sciences to flesh out the criteria of adequacy behind the Medjugorje experiences in order to measure whether the experiences lived up to the established tests of modern secular and scientific knowledge. This was the approach of the teams who examined the visionaries.[20] However, since the constructive-

[20] This is an observation about the nature of the methodological approach – which was constructive-relational – of the teams that studied the visionaries and not a claim that they conscientiously or formally used Rogers' "constructive-relational" approach as published in his paper.

relational method is all-encompassing in its multidisciplinary focus, the application of such a method would not have to stop at the criteria of adequacy but could, in fact, venture beyond it to consider theological interpretations of the phenomenon, much like the 1985 Italian team did, combining the work of scientists, psychologists, and theologians to reach their 12-point conclusion about the experiences of the visionaries. While, as was noted, the anthropologist Paolo Apolito was critical of this analysis—the combination of scientific empiricism with theological speculation (or, one could say, the combination of etic and emic perspectives)—there is a degree of validity to consider in this approach. The judgment of whether the theological content of the visionaries claims is true or not is, once again, an ecclesial judgment, and therefore beyond the scope of this dissertation or of individual theologians. However, where there is a great degree of validity in considering the constructive-relational approach of incorporating a theological framework, alongside every other discipline that may help to ascertain a more holistic understanding of religious experiences (both the etic and the emic), is in keeping the door open to the Jamesian "more" instead of presumptuously closing that cognitive consideration. The issue with overly ascriptive/attributional approaches, as previously observed, can be that interpreters may ascribe meaning to everything *except* the religious experience itself, too often dismissing the very possibility that there may be veracity behind the purported content that the believer ascribes to the experience. The constructive-relational approach keeps this possibility open by incorporating perspectives that can account for criteria of adequacy but also by considering perspectives that can travel beyond it into the realm of theology, spirituality, and grace: not restricting knowledge but keeping the epistemological considerations to the something "more" accessible.

Interestingly, the Medjugorje studies also bring clarity, and much reconciliation, toward the dichotomous manner in which religion and science have, in recent centuries, been presented, as representing two divergent and contradictory worldviews. This has especially been the case, as chapter four examined, since the 1800s in regard to the cultures of psychiatry and medical science, on the one hand, and Christian mysticism and supernatural religious beliefs, on the other hand. France provided a particularly important setting in highlighting this cultural divide between the influential medical reductionism of Charcot and the Neurology Clinic at La Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, and, contrariwise, the visionary experiences of Bernadette Soubirous and the alleged healing miracles associated with the events in Lourdes.[21] It is appropriate that historically a Marian apparition site was the center of debate in this cultural divide between science and religion. It is appropriate for it is the events at a modern Marian apparition site, in Medjugorje, which provide much needed reconciliation between the two sides of this debate.

What is significant about the experiences in Medjugorje is how the cultures of science and religion *came together* to ascertain a more comprehensive grasp and understanding of the nature of the phenomenon. An interdisciplinary integration transpired, through a multifarious diversity of scientific studies on the Medjugorje visionaries and their religious experiences,

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[21] Micale writes: "To the best of my knowledge, the appearance of the miraculous in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, during the years that are supposed to have represented the heyday of atheistic scientism, has not yet been adequately explained by historians. It is probably not coincidental that Lourdes was founded and flourished during the highpoint of what William James called 'medical materialism.' The late nineteenth century was a period of assertive positivist ideology . . . in which science was believed by many people to provide self-sufficient explanations for all natural as well as social phenomena. In this light, Lourdes, to many members of the scientific intelligentsia, represented an affront to the spirit of the age, a perverse throwback to a superstitious prescientific past." Similarly, Lachapelle explains: "While church attendance dropped and atheism, positivism, and scientism were dominant trends of the time, the nineteenth century, particularly its second half, was also a vibrant period for Catholicism. . . . At the popular level, spiritual beliefs were made tangible through physical evidence of the supernatural. Stigmatics, ecstatics, visionaries, miraculously cured persons were an important part of the spiritual landscape of the period. The rich, mystical character of the second half of the nineteenth century is now well established." Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 263; Lachapelle, "Between Miracle and Sickness," 79.

which completely challenged and contradicted the dichotomous ideology that has, too often, pinned science and religion against each other as two oppositional and irreconcilable forces which cannot work together (as if two divergent worldviews were represented that cannot coexist). Dr. Philippe Loron, who examined the Medjugorje visionaries in 1989, was – some irony is noteworthy – the former head of the Neurology Clinic at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, an heir to that famous medical institute which at a certain point in history was renowned for re-diagnosing mystical experiences into pathological categories, and dismissing mystics and visionaries as hysterics. About the experiences of the visionaries in Medjugorje, Dr. Loron would say: "This is the first time that medical science has been involved to such an extent in evaluating the phenomenon of ecstasy. And, in the process, what was confirmed in several ways was the moral and psychological integrity of the visionaries."[22] Unlike famous predecessors at the Neurology Clinic at La Salpêtrière, this doctor was not able to honestly diagnose such a case of visionary experience as belonging to the category of hysteria, or any other psychopathological explanation. Science would no longer allow it.

[22] Quoted in Sullivan, *Miracle Detective*, 240-241.

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