

Perennialism and religious experience

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Abstract: This essay introduces the inaugural issue of *Religious Studies Archives*. It constructs a narrative about perennialism and its relationship to mystical and numinous experiences, and weaves summaries of the five articles published here into that narrative. It explains what perennialism is, distinguishes narrow and broad senses of the term, and identifies some of the major developments in the debate about perennialism that took place in the second half of the twentieth century. Reasons for selecting the five papers in question are also provided, and a closing suggestion for further research is made.

The term 'perennialism' has multiple meanings. According to one definition, it is a form of religious pluralism. Specifically, it is the view that there is a shared core of truth in all major religions (sometimes called a perennial philosophy) and that this core is grounded in and justified by shared religious experiences, usually of the mystical variety. Perennialism so defined has a long history, dating all the way back to ancient times. It is still taken seriously, especially by those who regard themselves as spiritual but not religious. It has not, however, been a popular topic in recent years among philosophers of religion. Since the turn of the century, philosophers have shown little interest in the nature or phenomenology of religious experiences, despite having intense interest in their epistemology. Further, recent work on pluralism largely ignores perennialism, focusing instead almost exclusively on John Hick's hyper-Kantian version of pluralism. In contrast, around the time *Religious Studies* published its first issue, perennialism was a subject of much debate, not just among philosophers and scholars of religion, but outside of academia as well. No doubt Aldous Huxley's widely read 1948 book, *The Perennial Philosophy*, had something to do with this.

For this reason, it is not surprising that in its early years, *Religious Studies* published a sizeable number of articles on the nature of mystical experience and, more specifically, on the question of whether or not certain types of religious experiences, especially mystical experiences, are 'essentially the same',

phenomenologically speaking, in all or almost all human cultures and religious traditions. The position that there are such religious experiences was often called 'perennialism'. Of course, one can accept perennialism so defined and reject the related idea of a perennial philosophy or a common core of religious truth. But the use of the term 'perennialism' in this narrower sense (henceforth 'narrow perennialism') strongly suggests that the issue of the plausibility of 'broad perennialism' with its commitment to a perennial philosophy helped to motivate many of these articles.

Another crucial piece of background information is that much of the literature on mysticism in the early years of *Religious Studies* responded to the work of Walter T. Stace (1886–1967), a British philosopher who, following a lengthy career as a civil servant, emigrated to America, where he taught at Princeton University from 1932 until his retirement in 1955. In a very influential book called *Mysticism and Philosophy* (1960), which was published five years before the first issue of *Religious Studies*, Stace defends (among other things) narrow perennialism. He claims that there are two fundamental sorts of mystical experience, each of which can be found in all cultures and religions and in all historical periods. The first is extrovertive mystical experience. This experience occurs when, looking outward with one's senses and observing nature in all its variety, one becomes aware of an underlying oneness to it all and of one's unity with that oneness. The second major type is introvertive. In order to have an introvertive mystical experience, one must learn (usually after extensive training and practice) to look inward and to empty one's consciousness of its ordinary contents. If one can do that, then awareness of a monistic or unitary reality may follow. In this state, one experiences union with this sacred reality, or at least fails to experience any distinction between oneself and 'the One'.

Another influential scholar of mysticism at the time was R. C. Zaehner, who, after a very dangerous career as a British spy in Iran, held the Spalding Chair of Eastern Religion and Ethics at Christ College, Oxford University, from 1952 until his sudden death at the age of 61 in 1974. Zaehner was a critic of narrow perennialism or 'universalism' as he sometimes called it. In one of his most influential books, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (1957), he defends the view that there are two fundamentally distinct kinds of introvertive mystical experiences, a relatively impoverished monistic one whose object is one's own soul and a higher dualistic one in which one becomes aware of God.

The author of the first article selected for this inaugural issue of *Religious Studies Archives* is Ninian Smart. Smart, who also worked in British Intelligence but only briefly, held academic positions at multiple universities, including a very prestigious Research Chair at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He was influential in promoting religious studies as a secular discipline distinct from

theology and was President of the American Academy of Religion at the time of his death in 2001. In the very first issue of *Religious Studies*, in an article called 'Interpretation and Mystical Experience', Smart defends Stace's (and his own) version of narrow perennialism against Zaehner's critique of it, arguing that monistic and theistic introvertive mystical experiences are essentially similar.

Zaehner's work exemplifies a standard objection to narrow perennialism. Just as the chief challenge to the idea of a perennial philosophy is the variety and apparent incompatibility of some of the core doctrines of different religions, the chief challenge to perennialism about mystical experience is the striking differences between the reports of mystics from different traditions. Such differences are difficult to reconcile with the idea that all of these experiences are essentially the same, phenomenologically speaking. Smart and Stace respond to this challenge by distinguishing between experience and interpretation. Similarity in core phenomenology, they say, explains the similarities in the reports of mystics from different traditions, while variety in interpretation explains the variety. No doubt, as Nelson Pike (1994, chap. 6) has shown, this approach cannot explain all of the data, but perennialists do not need to deny all variety in phenomenology, at least not if the ultimate goal is just to defend broad perennialism as defined above. All they need to show is that the phenomenology of mystical experiences of the most developed or mature sort is 'essentially' (i.e., more or less) the same.

Smart's article is a useful introduction to the topic of perennialism and religious experience. It makes a number of helpful conceptual distinctions and methodological points, as well as challenging Zaehner's reading of crucial mystical texts. Of course, even if Smart's defence of narrow perennialism succeeds, a defence of broad perennialism would require showing that mystical experiences justify one or more cross-cultural beliefs about religious reality. Enter William J. Wainwright, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Wainwright never worked for any intelligence agency (or so he *claims*), but his landmark paper, 'Mysticism and Sense Perception', is one of the most important papers ever published in *Religious Studies* and for that reason was a very easy choice for inclusion in this collection.

Wainwright argues that, since mystical experiences are similar in a variety of epistemologically relevant ways to sense experiences (e.g., they are noetic, they induce corrigible claims that are independently checkable, and their subjects use *relevant* tests to determine which are genuine and which are not), it follows that some mystical experiences are probably veridical. Some of the most important points Wainwright makes in defence of this argument have been repeated over and over again in subsequent literature. For example, the analogy between mystical experience and sense experience is sometimes criticized on the grounds that sense experiences, unlike mystical experiences, provide data that can be used to predict

the future. Wainwright points out that this difference is no reason to distrust mystical experiences because it can be accounted for by the difference between the objects of sense experiences (which are largely passive and law-governed) and the objects of mystical experiences (e.g. God).

Another, more subtle example of how Wainwright's article influenced later research on the epistemology of religious experience concerns the principle of credulity, which states that perceptual or noetic experiences or, more broadly, (epistemic) seemings are 'epistemologically innocent until proven guilty'. Most arguments from religious experience formulated after Wainwright's article was published include as one of their premises some version of the principle of credulity. For example, Richard Swinburne appeals to the principle that in the absence of defeaters, what seems to one to be so probably is so. What is often overlooked is that Wainwright implicitly endorses such a principle when he argues that it is unreasonable to demand (non-circular) evidence for the reliability of entire cognitive practices like sense perception or mystical perception or introspection or memory. Anticipating much of the literature on the epistemology of religious experience that came later, Wainwright points out that the attempt to meet such a demand is doomed to failure whenever the practice in question is fundamental. Assuming that radical skepticism is not a reasonable option, this amounts to claiming that the deliverances of fundamental cognitive practices should be trusted in the absence of positive reasons to doubt them, which is, of course, a version of the principle of credulity.

Not long after Wainwright's seminal article was published, a new challenge to perennialism arose that was widely (if not wisely) regarded as decisive. The leading figure here was Steven T. Katz, an American philosopher who currently holds the Alvin J. and Shirley Slater Chair of Jewish and Holocaust Studies at Boston University. In 1978, he published a highly influential article called 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism' (Katz (1978), 22-74), in which he criticizes what he called the 'essentialist' view about the nature of mystical experience and defended an alternative that he preferred to call 'contextualism' but which later became known as 'constructivism'. Katz emphasizes that no experience is unmediated and that religious experience is constructed or shaped by concepts that vary from one culture to another, making it impossible for religious experiences of any sort to be cross-cultural.

Seven years later, in 1985, *Religious Studies* published the third article chosen for this collection, a powerful critique of Katz's objections to perennialism called 'Hyper-Kantianism in Recent Discussions of Mystical Experience'. The author of this article was J. William Forgie, who is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Santa Barbara. One of Forgie's main points is that, even though Stace, in defending narrow perennialism (which Forgie calls the 'doctrine of

unanimity'), employs a questionable theory of the nature of experience – a theory according to which experience is completely unmediated and for that reason incorrigible – perennialism is not committed to that theory. The perennialist can grant that our minds in some sense help to construct or shape our experiences. For example, they can accept Kant's theory that the human mind imposes certain categories on the objects that it knows. Since these categories do not vary from one human being to another, Kant's theory is compatible with phenomenological uniformity across human cultures. What the perennialist needs to deny is the *hyper-Kantian* view that religious experiences are shaped in substantial ways, not just by universal concepts and beliefs, but by concepts and beliefs that vary from one culture or religious tradition to another. It is this hyper-Kantianism that rules out cross-cultural religious experience. If, however, hyper-Kantianism is implausible, then Katz's challenge to narrow perennialism and thus to broad perennialism fails.

Three years before Forgie's paper appeared, *Religious Studies* published an article called 'The Nature of Mystical Experience'. This fascinating essay, which is the fourth article chosen for this issue of *RS Archives*, was authored by Christine Overall, who is currently Professor Emerita of Philosophy and the holder of a Research Chair at Queen's University in Toronto, Canada. Overall describes her paper as a response to the debate between Stace's traditional view of the nature of mystical experience and Katz's constructivist alternative. She takes Katz's side on this debate, construing her own view as a further development of Katz's. In her own words, Overall's view is that 'mystical experience is, or is like, the exercising of a special skill, the skill of experiencing unitively' (Overall (1982), 54).

While this view is at odds with Stace's position that mystical experiences are *given* to a passive mystic, who then interprets them in various culturally conditioned ways, it is far from clear that it is incompatible with perennialism (in either sense) or, for that matter, with the denial of Katz's hyper-Kantian constructivism. This is made clear by an analogy that Overall borrows from C. D. Broad. In Broad's words,

Most of the detailed facts which biologists tell us about the minute structure and changes in cells can be perceived only by persons who have had a long training in the use of the microscope. In this case we believe that the *agreement* among trained microscopists really does correspond to facts which untrained persons cannot perceive. (Quoted in Overall (1982), 49.)

While the vast majority of people, because of a lack of training or ability, never have the experiences that microscopists have when observing cells through a microscope, no one would deny that these experiences are cross-cultural or that they generate justified beliefs about cells. If mystical experiences, which do require training, are like that, then Overall's theory of the nature of mystical experience might fit well with perennialism.

Further, Overall's theory could alleviate a worry about Wainwright's argument for the cognitive value of mystical experience. One challenge to that argument is that there is an important disanalogy between sense experience and mystical experience, namely, that the former is universal among human beings while the latter is rare. By changing the crucial analogue from sense experience in general to highly skilled sense experience, which is of course reliable in spite of being rare, Wainwright's case for the probable veridicality of mystical experience becomes all that much stronger.

The final article in this collection is called 'Numinous Experience and Religious Language'. It was authored by Leon Schlamm, who prior to his death in 2015 had been a lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Kent. Philosophers of religion have written far less about numinous experiences than about mystical experiences. This is unfortunate, because a strong case can be made for the position that the content of numinous experience, like the content of unitary mystical experience but unlike the content of 'mystic apprehensions' (visions and locutions), is substantially the same in all or most religious traditions.

For readers unfamiliar with Rudolf Otto's work on numinous experience, here is a very brief (yet controversial) account of Otto's theory of their nature. Much like ordinary experiences of other minds and extrovertive mystical experiences, numinous experiences are often mediated by ordinary sense experiences. Usually, they are dualistic insofar as what one seems to be aware of is a reality whose nature is incommensurable with one's own. The mystery here is not just negative, though, phenomenologically speaking. Instead, the apparent object of the experience (the 'numen') seems to possess several distinct qualities that are irreducibly religious. In response, the subject experiences a number of irreducibly religious emotions, including distinctively religious varieties of dread or awe, stupor or amazement, ontological insignificance or powerlessness ('I, who am but dust and ashes'), profaneness or uncleanness, and longing, enchantment, or bliss.

Most of Schlamm's article, which was published in 1992, consists of a brief account of the nature of numinous experience, followed by a fairly lengthy critique of Katz's constructivist theory (and two other similar theories) of the relationship of language to religious experience. These parts of the essay are highly competent and similar in important respects to Forgie's critique of constructionism, but that is not why this essay appears in this collection. The main reason for its selection is the positive proposal that Schlamm makes at the end of the essay. In the last five paragraphs, Schlamm provides a brilliant (in both the American and English senses of the word) and original account of the function and value of Otto's use of analogical language and symbols to 'describe' or, better, 'point to' different aspects of numinous experience.

Though Schlamm makes no reference to Overall's essay, his account fits beautifully with Overall's perceptual skill theory of religious experience. Crucially, in the case of many specialized perceptual skills, it is clear that possessing a specialized language increases the specialized skill. Schlamm's account can be understood as asserting that the specialized language Otto develops in his classic book, *The Idea of the Holy*, enhances the ability of the subject of a numinous experience to distinguish between the subtly different components in that experience and to recognize certain relationships between those components. Thus, the subject can fully appreciate the richness and significance of what might otherwise have been a rather inchoate and confusing experience. This in turn enables these subjects to remember numinous experiences previously forgotten, and even to increase the frequency of future numinous experiences. On this theory, Otto's use of analogical language and symbols is not, as Otto himself emphasized, intended to help those who have never had a numinous experience. Instead, it increases the perceptual skills of those who have had them in the same way that learning a relevant language can help wine tasters discriminate between the different attributes of a wine but is of no use to teetotalers wanting to know what it is like to taste fine wine.

If Schlamm is right, then with significantly less training than is typically needed to have an introvertive mystical experience, most of us can, with Otto's help, become connoisseurs of the numinous. And if numinous experiences are perennial, veridical, and religiously foundational, as Otto for one thought they were, then by becoming connoisseurs of the numinous we can become experts on religion *per se*. This raises the question of whether broad perennialism could plausibly be based on numinous experiences instead of mystical experiences. Perhaps that issue will be addressed in pages of *Religious Studies* that have not yet been written.

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