

Everybody Has a Connection Experience: Prevalence, Confusions, Interference, and Redefinition

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This paper is an attempt to bring forward awareness of the existence and significance of “connection experiences”, what others call mystical experience, religious experience, and so on. The paper addresses the reality of the experiences, and well as some of the confusions, misconceptions, distortions, and just plain avoidance displayed by sociologists and others.

1 Introduction

We live in a world where most people believe in God. Despite propaganda to the contrary, the number of atheists in the world remains rather small (only 3 % in the U.S.A, and only 9 % in Canada), and this is even after a couple of centuries of scientific progress (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, 9). We can ask the question why, and of course, some people will say that it is because people are stupid and gullible (Dawkins 2006), but that is not always the case. People who accept the existence of God, and people who take spiritual experiences seriously, do so not because they are stupid and irrational, but because they are logical and intelligent (Boyer 2001), because there are structures in their brain that support it (Newberg and Waldman 2009; Newberg, d'Aquile, and Rause 2001), and (most importantly) because they have had *experiences* that make them question the dogmatic scientific view that the only thing that exists is the material universe that we can see with our material eyes.

Yes, you heard me right. Some people, who knows how many, believe in the spiritual side of life because they have had various types of spiritual experiences that make them believe in a spiritual side to life. These experiences cause them to question their current ontological assumptions and open up their thinking to expanded possibilities. This much has been recognized for thousands of years. In the Western world, there are traditions of spiritual/mystical experience that go all the way back to Plato and beyond (Versluis 2007). Some Western academics have even taken mystical experience seriously. William James, the man who helped found American psychology, felt that all religions were based on the mystical experience of some charismatic avatar (James 1982), and others have agreed. Indeed, Abraham Maslow made his career on the study of "peak experiences" (Maslow 1994, 1968, 2012; Lester *et al.* 1983) which are just a secular name for weak mystical experiences. The point here, people believe not because they are stupid, but because they have experiences that prove to them that something else exists.



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Let's face it, these hidden laws [of mysticism] are hidden, but they are only hidden by [your] own ignorance. And the word mystical is just arrived at through people's ignorance. There's nothing mystical about it, only that you're ignorant of what that entails.

George Harrison

2 How Many?

I suppose the question now becomes, how many people have these experiences? Conservative estimates put the number anywhere between thirty and fifty percent (Bourque and Back 1971; Bourque 1969; Yamane and Polzer 1994). And note, it is not just the uneducated who have these experiences. The limited sociological research that has been conducted on the phenomenon has found that those with more education are equally likely, if not *more* likely, to have profound mystical experiences (Bourque and Back 1971; Bourque 1969). Educated Westerners just don't conceptualize it in the same way as others. Instead of using language and concepts provided to them by priests and gurus, they use a secular and psychologically neutral language. The educated characterize mystical experiences as peak experiences (Maslow 1971; Maslow 1962), transcendence experience (Maslow 1971), "pure consciousness events" (Forman 1999), or as Albert Einstein put it, "cosmic religious feeling" (Einstein 1930). There are a lot of different names for the same core experience. I think, arguably, if we were to open the field and synchronize our definitions, we would find that most people have mystical experiences. Indeed, Abraham Maslow found exactly this. His surprise at the ubiquity of religious experience is expressed in the following quotation:

In my first investigations... I used this word because I thought some people had peak-experiences and others did not. But as I gathered information, and as I became more skillful in asking questions, I found that a higher and higher percentage of my subjects began to report peak-experiences... I finally fell into the habit of expecting everyone to have peak-experiences and of being rather surprised if I ran across somebody who could report none at all. Because of this experience, I finally began to use the word 'non-peaker' to describe, not the person who is unable to have peak-experiences, but rather the person who is afraid of them, who suppresses them, who denies them, who turns away from them, or who 'forgets' them (Maslow 2012, 340–1).

He goes on:

At first it was our thought that some people simply didn't have peaks. But, as I said above, we found out later that it's much more probable that the non-peakers have them but repress or misinterpret them, or-for whatever reason-reject them and therefore don't use them. Some of the reasons for such rejection so far found are: (1) a strict Marxian attitude, as with Simone de Beauvoir, who was persuaded that this was a weakness, a sickness (also Ar-

thur Koestler). A Marxist should be 'tough'. Why Freud rejected his is anybody's guess: perhaps (2) his 19th century mechanistic-scientific attitude, perhaps (3) his pessimistic character. Among my various subjects I have found both causes at work sometimes. In others I have found (4) a narrowly rationalistic attitude which I considered a defense against being flooded by emotion, by irrationality, by loss of control, by illogical tenderness, by dangerous femininity, or by the fear of insanity. One sees such attitudes more often in engineers, in mathematicians, in analytic philosophers, in bookkeepers and accountants, and generally in obsessional people (Maslow 1962).

It is interesting to me that Maslow suggests that Freud, notorious for his opinion that religion was an infantile human delusion (Freud 1964), had his own mystical experience, but that he "rejected" it for an unknown reason. Maslow suggests it is because of the mechanistic bias of 19th-century science, or perhaps his pessimistic personality. Freud, it would seem, had a mystical experience, maybe more, but came down hard against its validity and utility.

So what are we to make of this? Unless we want to discount the evidence, and people's experience, we need to accept the fact that at least a lot, if not most (and perhaps all) people have mystical experiences, whatever those might be, and that these experiences form the basis of their belief in things beyond the material world. Since I am not the kind of scholar to discount people's experience, and since I wholeheartedly agree with both Walter Stace who says that mystical experience is "a psychological fact of which there is abundant evidence" (Stace 1960a), and with Abraham Maslow who thinks that everybody has mystical experiences, but some people deny or misrepresent, for personal, emotional, or psychopathological reasons that have nothing to do with the reality or science of it all, I'm going to accept the reality of mystical experience. You, the reader, can believe whatever you want.

3 What is Mystical Experience?

Once we accept the validity of mystical experience, then we need to be careful not to pathologize it. Although there are some cases where mystical experience intersects with madness (Heriot-Maitland 2008), in most cases mystical experiences have positive effects on the mental health of the people who have them (Newberg, d'Aquile, and Rause 2001). Indeed, Abraham Maslow said that the healthiest people have mystical experiences (Maslow 1962).

If you accept that mystical experience is valid and a lot of people have them, and if you can avoid pathologizing it long enough to take a closer look, the next question becomes, *what is a mystical experience*. Unfortunately, that is not an easy question to answer, not because the answer is particularly difficult to come up with, but because we, and by “we” I mean the scholars who study mystical experience, often get stuck trying to answer it. We get stuck for a few reasons, I think.

Reason one: Mystical experience is big. The first reason we get stuck trying to understand and explain it is that it is big..., really big..., so big in fact that the people who have them often exclaim they are “ineffable” and “beyond words” (Stace 1960a, b). Mystical experiences are often, though now always, filled with grand cosmic revelations, glorious divine enlightenments, and the recognition of vast and powerful cosmic intelligence, as Einstein put it (Hermanns 1983), far beyond “normal” human consciousness. It’s like an LSD trip when your brain is still underdeveloped. The psychedelics of it “blow your mind”, at least temporarily, and make it difficult to find words.

The size of these experiences is a problem. It is a problem for the people who have them because it makes it difficult to integrate and ground their “cosmic experiences”, as Einstein would say. It is also a problem for some scholars because from the subject’s expression of ineffability, some scholars conclude ineffability, and leave it at that, not trying. Happy to poke around at the periphery of the phenomenon, they leave it at that. “We’ll never understand it,” they’ll say, “because it is above human language, and impossible to understand.”

Reason two: No common language. Of course, not everybody gets stuck on the cosmic bigness of the mystical experiences, or cops out trying to figure it out. Some do try to explain it, but that can be a problem as well because those who do try to explain it contribute to what I want to call **lexical confusion**. Lots of people have come up with lots of different words to describe the whole thing, but all these words get

poured into an intra-cultural word soup that does more to obscure than enlighten. Western mystics talk about the experiences of gnosis (Inge 2005, 9) [1], oneness, **connection** with the incorruptible one (Wisse 1990, 105), or the descent of Christ consciousness. Hindus call it *Samādhi* (Zimmer 1951), *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, or experiencing the boundless bliss of Brahman. Sufis say *Fana* (Vaughan-Lee 1998) and Buddhists say *Satori* (Smith 1958). In the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, we connect to the *Clear Light* (Evans-Wents 1960). Evangelical Christians speak of being “born again” into the Light or experiencing the *Living Flame of Love* (John of the Cross 2015) or the *Love-Fire* (Böhme 1912). And it is not just the extremely faithful that speak of it. Even those few scientists who have looked at it have come up with their own language, calling them peak experiences, “pure consciousness events”, *cosmic religious feeling*, and so on. It is a bloody Babylonian tower of bewildering biblical proportions, that is for sure. With no consistent and agreed upon language or framework, defining mystical experience clearly, discussing it sensibly, and understanding it even a little, is a challenge.

Reason three: Confusion and obfuscation. Lexical and phenomenological obstacles are not the only reasons we get stuck trying to explain mystical experience. Another problem comes from the fact that some hide their teachings and understandings to confuse and obscure. This sounds conspiratorial, but not really. What I am talking about here are the political and social class dynamics of human spirituality. Just like all things, there are complex social class, political, and even gender interests figure into human spirituality. There is evidence of members of certain social classes inferring with and obfuscating human spirituality throughout human history. Consider for example the western Tarot deck. This tarot deck, which some take to be a fountain of esoteric spiritual wisdom, is a remarkable piece of spiritual/political propaganda, so remarkable in fact that the foremost and most respected historical scholars of the tarot called it the

...most successful propaganda campaign ever launched: not by a very long way the most important, but the most completely successful. An entire false history, and false interpretation, of the Tarot pack was concocted by the occultists; and it is all but universally believed (Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett 1996, 27).

Essentially freemasons developed this deck at a time when they needed to shift spiritual thinking in a direction away from support of feudal elites, and towards support and development of capitalist agenda (Sosteric 2014). They used the

power and authority vested in their lodges to create a tool to disseminate not wisdom about mystical or religious experiences, but western propaganda disguised as spiritual wisdom. The dissemination of a propaganda deck that presents as a tool of deep spiritual wisdom *confuses* and *obfuscates* the issues.

Of course, the tarot is not the same as mystical experience, but they do speak about it in their works, and it does point to the reality of interference in human spirituality. Other sociologists have uncovered more examples of direct obfuscation. Sociologists Bender (2010) and Jantzen (1995) have pointed out how political interests, economic interests, and even gender biases figure into the sanitation and obfuscation of mystical investigations and scholarly theorizations of same. Jantzen, for example, notes how powerful men have sanitized and “domesticated” mystical experience, *stripping it of important elements* and abstracting it into a private and personalized thing *nothing like* the actual experiences of those who have them. It has been going on a long time. In a working paper entitled *From Zoroaster to Star Wars, Jesus to Marx*, I point out how most of the world’s institutionalized spiritualities are rooted in what elite Sassanian priests did with Zoroaster’s original mystical teachings when they captured them and wrote them down some eighteen hundred years ago (Sosteric 2018a). I hypothesize, but have little doubt, which in the process, they sanitized and stripped important elements of the experience, distorting, confusing, and leaving it harder to understand the nature and import of the experiences.

Interestingly, suggesting there is deliberate interference in human spirituality is not particularly novel, nor are sociologists the only ones who do it. As the historian Versluis notes, western mystical traditions are quite elitist and have a long history of obscuring the truth behind closed temple doors so that “the masses” do not have access to the real truths (Versluis 2007). Ostensibly, they hide their understanding because they believe that the masses “*cannot handle the truth*” [2]. The words of Brother Wilmhurst, a Freemason and advocate of esoteric spirituality, which is spirituality where mysticism is obscured and hidden from public view, eloquently expresses this idea, which is that mysticism should be hidden from public view and the teachings obscured.

In all periods of the world’s history, and in every part of the globe, secret orders and societies have existed outside the limits of the official churches for teaching what are called ‘the Mysteries’: for imparting to ‘suitable and prepared minds’ certain truths of human life, certain instructions about divine things, about the things that belong to our peace, about human nature and human destiny, which

it was undesirable to publish to the multitude who would but profane those teachings and apply the esoteric knowledge that was communicated to ‘perverse’ and perhaps to ‘disastrous’ ends (Wilmhurst 1922).

From the above quote you can see that members of esoteric (read elite) organizations want to hide the truth, they have an excuse for hiding the truth, and, as sociologists are beginning to discover in more detail, they work hard to confuse, obfuscate, and sanitize the truth. Why? As a sociologist, I think it is because they don’t want the people to see the uncomfortable truth about mystical or religious experience, which is they trend in democratic, revolutionary, and egalitarian directions that are antagonistic to the status quo (Sosteric 2018b). Human spirituality is something that those interested in maintaining the status quo need to control and subvert, and they work hard to do just that. Even Christian scholars themselves must now admit that the elites in the Catholic Church entered thousands of edits into the bible (Ehrman 2007). They may stumble trying to understand why, but a sociologist would immediately hypothesize social class dynamics and interference, with the only real issue being to unpack the specific reasons why.

I have so say, uncovering the social class dynamics of human institutions, human actions, and human knowledge, is what we, and by “we” I mean sociologists, do. It is our “thing” so to speak, and it is a thing that I believe is very valuable and necessary, not only academically to those interested in the full truth of human spirituality, but also practically, for society and the world, especially in these times when we are beginning to explore the spiritual/existential roots of violence (Dědová 2018), and especially as we are beginning to see how easy it is to weaponize human spirituality. Given that there is clear historical and sociological evidence for interference in human spirituality, and given that sociologists are particularly adept at exploring the related dimensions, I think that to fully understand human spirituality, we need a multidisciplinary effort with increased contributions from sociologists. Contributions by sociologists are going to raise awareness of some of the “conspiracies” that have subverted what I would call authentic spirituality, but that can only add to our understanding of human spirituality.

Reason four: Explaining to the uninitiated. Lexical confusion, the bigly-ness of it all, and intentional interference all muddy the water and make it easy for us to get stuck, and hard for us to explain and understand, but that is not all it. Even if you do get past the bigness of the experience. Even if you do sort out the lexical confusion long enough so that you can understand. Even if you don’t get snapped up by

gender and social class distortions that, sometimes intentionally, often unintentionally, obfuscate authentic human spirituality, you still get stuck trying to explain it to the “uninitiated”. By uninitiated, I mean someone who has never, or as Maslow points out, more likely doesn’t remember having/ is repressing, a mystical experience. Trying to explain to, and have a conversion with, someone who has never had a mystical experience is like trying to explain what you see with your eyes, to somebody who doesn’t have eyes to see. I’m not saying anything new. We’re all familiar with the parable of the elephant. Trying to explain mystical experience to the uninitiated is like trying to explain an elephant to a group of blindfolded men who never get to see it, and can only understand by feeling it up.

Combine language difficulties with the size of it, intentional obfuscation, and problems communicating to the uninitiated, and you can understand why defining, understanding, and explaining mystical experience is a major challenge. I try to capture the challenge of it in my *Allegory of the Blindfold* (Sosteric 2017a), but I’m not the first one to point out the challenges, either directly or through allegory and metaphor. Indeed, Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* is a classic attempt to explain the problems associated with understanding and talking about mystical experiences to those still facing the lights on the wall.

4 Mystical Experience is Connection

With all the problems associated with mystical experience, is it possible to understand, define, and discuss? I believe it is, though I will say, it takes a lot of work to wrap your head around it, even when you are a longtime “explorer of the realms” as I am. I think the best way to at least start talking about the experience is to understand mystical experiences, religious experiences, as, at root, connection experiences (Sosteric 2017b). From the mystical “connection” flows the various forms of connection experience, like religious experience, mystical experience, Fana, connection to the “pure light”, and so on, with individual variation in intensity and depth being explained by psychological, sociological, and even neurological variables, like the religious or political lens through which the experience flows, any pathologies that may be present, damage to the brain systems, and so on.

Moving forward, based on research and my own connection experiences, I would like to define mystical experience simply as **connection** to something more than the **Normal Consciousness** of our daily existence. What is this more?

Lukoff suggests the “more” is the divine. According to Lukoff, mystical experience is a harmonious relationship (i.e. connection) to the divine. Similarly, Phillips (2001, 494) suggests that a mystical experience is “*direct awareness of... a ‘Spiritual Object’ [such] as Brahman*”, in other words, a connection to divinity. When somebody has a mystical experience, they are having an experience characterized by connection to the divine, or some aspect of it. That is, they are connected to something more than their normal, egoic consciousness. This definition accurately represents the general phenomenology of the mystical experience. I think if you ask anybody who has had mystical experiences, religious experience, peak experiences, etc., every single one would agree; they’ve connected to “*something more than the normal identity of their normal daily life*”.

Of course, not everybody agrees that there is anything divine about mystical experience. Some will tell you that the mystical experience has neurological roots. They will say that mystical experience occurs when neurological things happen in the brain (Newberg, d’Aquile, and Rause 2001; Newberg and Waldman 2009; Heriot-Maitland 2008). By making this claim, they reduce the “more” of mystical experience to neurological activity. Others (Dossey 2012), myself included, would say that “the more” is not neurological (though there may be neurological correlates), but in fact “more” than even that. As already noted, as Lukoff and Phillips suggest, the “more” is something divine. I prefer to put aside notions of divinity and adopt a more secular language. I would theorize that “the more” we connect to is the **Fabric of Consciousness** (Sosteric 2016) as it exists sui generis, and independently of the physical universe. You can call that Fabric God, G-D, Ain, Ain Soph, Para Brahman, the All, the Living Flame, the Clear Light, Cosmic Intelligence, or whatever you want. I simply call it “The Fabric of Consciousness”. It is to this “Fabric” that, if you can believe Abraham Maslow, we all connect to, with more or less intensity, with more or less duration, with more or less frequency, and with more or less open acknowledge, when we have a mystical experience.

5 Conclusion

So, everybody has a connection experience. Everybody connects, at one time or another, to something more. Whether you think the “something more” is merely a disaggregated or innervated neural network, or something that exists independently of the body, is neither here nor there. I believe it is more than simple neural activity, but until scientists can all see for themselves how consciousness can interface with physical matter without physical intervention (a “quantum”

discovery I predict is only a few years off now), my belief will only be a belief.

But, that's not the point. The point of this short little note is not to get into a scientific discussion of the merits of idealism versus materialism, or to hammer down whether it all comes down to material existence or not, the point is to simply say, *connection experiences* are valid human experiences that are a lot more common, and a lot more significant, a lot more pervasive, and not as well understood as we might at first think. That is all. What you take from these simple statements is up to you. I will say this, however. Despite secular prayers to the contrary, atheism hasn't taken hold, and it is not because humans are stupid, it is because there's something there that keeps them interested and engaged. Organized religion is certainly on the decline, but scholars

are now talking about the transition to a "new stage" [3] of religious development "*a new era of experience-based religion, one whose foundation is an intense, personal experience of sacredness*" (Roberts 2014). If that's true, and I suspect it is, it certainly behooves us, and by "us" I mean scholars in all disciplines interested in human spirituality, to get our heads around the phenomenon of religion/mystical/connection experience, fast. If we do not then, in an increasingly "connected" world that advances with or without our blessing and understanding, we're going to seem increasingly confused and out of place.

Notes

- [1] As Inge says (Inge 2005, 9), gnosis is "*not merely hearsay and dependence*" on the teachings of others. Gnosis is that "*which envisages the unseen for itself. For it does not believe on a person, it believes in and into him.*" In other words, gnosis is direct mystical experience that you yourself have.
- [2] See, for example, Eckarshausen (1909), Lomas (2010, 2006), and Wilmhurst (1920).
- [3] This is in scare quotes because if we are now traversing to an age of connection experiences, we are certainly not traversing to a "new stage". There are simply too many words in the Sanskrit lexicon dealing with Consciousness, connection, the Fabric, union (yoga), and so on to think for a second that we haven't been here before. Rather, we are returning to a previous, how shall we say, Vedic stage of human existence, just with a lot more technology and capability. If it is true, and if the unexpected acceleration of climate change is any indication of what's in store, the next decade or two should prove quite interesting indeed.

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