

The Sociology of Mysticism



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After over a century of neglect, this paper recommends that sociologists reconsider investigating the mysticism dimension of Troeltsch's church-sect-mysticism framework, established over a hundred years ago in 1912 with the publication of *Die Soziallehrer* (Garrett, 1975). The paper underlines the significance of mystical experience, gives reasons for the sociological neglect, offers guidance on operationalising mystical experience, and provides a blueprint for research and analysis moving forward. While the paper makes a strong case for sociological investigation into this arguably important aspect of human spirituality, the paper also issues a warning against the development of mystocentrism.

Keywords: Sociology of Mysticism, Troeltsch, Authentic Spirituality, Marxism, Looking Glass Self, Cooley

I do not belong with those who reject in advance the study of so-called occult phenomena as being unscientific, or unworthy, or harmful. If I were at the beginning of my scientific career, instead of at the end of it as I am now, I might perhaps choose no other field of study—in spite of all its difficulties.

Sigmund Freud

Introduction

You see the extremes
Of what humans can be?
In that distance some tension's born
Energy surging like a storm
You plunge your hand in
And draw it back scorched
Beneath it's shining like
Gold but better
Rumours of Glory,

Bruce Cockburn

Sociology has displayed a long interest in religion. The interest has mostly centred on social structural (Durkheim, 1965 (1912)) and ideological (Marx, 1978; Weber, 1904 (1995)) analysis of religion institutions, or a combination of both (Berger, 1969). This interest has generated a booming literature on the Sociology of Religion (Christiano, Swatos, & Kivisto, 2008; Davie, 2013; Dawson & Thiessen 2014; Lundskow, 2008). It is noteworthy that in this literature attention has been primarily focused on established *public* institutions, the so called church-sect dimension of the *church-sect-mysticism* dimension established by Troeltsch in 1912 with the publication of *Die Soziallehrer* (Garrett, 1975). Sociology has by and large ignored the third dimension, *mysticism*. This despite the fact that other disciplines have a long history of looking at the third dimension (Anthony, Hermans, & Sterkens, 2010; Chen, Qi, Hood, & Watson, 2011; Freud, 1961, 1964; Hood, Ghorbani, &

Watson, 2001; James, 1982; Lazar & Kravetz, 2005; Maslow, 1994, 2012; Andrew Newberg, d'Aquile, & Rause, 2001; Proudfoot, 1985; Stace, 1960a), despite early interest by Max Weber (Robertson, 1975), despite some fleeting interest from a long time ago (Bourque, 1969; Bourque & Back, 1971; Greeley, 1975; Tiryakian, 1972; Truzzi, 1974), despite it being an ‘integral element of religion’, (Geels & Belzen, 2003, p. 7), and despite its early incorporation and theoretical integration into the ‘full sweep of … historical-sociological analysis’ (Garrett, 1975, p. 207). By and large sociologists have been silent, both empirically and theoretically, on non-institutionalised, non-public, mystical phenomenon. As Garrett (1975, p. 206) notes, sociology has had a ‘parochial—concentration on ecclesiastic institutions’ (Garrett, 1975: 220) and as a result ‘the concept of mysticism has mainly experienced wholehearted neglect at the hands of sociological investigators....’ This remains as true today as it was four decades ago.

Sociological ignorance of mystical experience is hardly a good thing. In fact, it is a massive oversight. Mystical experience is a big part of the fabric of the religious life of this planet and it should not be ignored. William James (1982) felt that mystical experience was the very bedrock and foundation of religion itself. He wrote about the ‘pattern-setters’ whose profound mystical experiences form the foundation of convention, tradition, and observance (James, 1982, p. 6). Others have echoed his analysis. Proudfoot (1985, p. xi) calls religious experience ubiquitous and states that, ‘Religion has always been an experiential matter. It is not just a set of creedal statements or a collection of rites’. Heriot-Maitland (2008, p. 302) notes ‘mystical experience is also thought to constitute the very essence of religion, such that the origin of a given tradition can often be traced to an initial transcendent encounter, moment of revelation, salvation, or enlightenment (i.e., the direct experiences of Buddha, Muhammad, and Paul clearly played a major role in the formation of their respective religions)’. Stace (1960b, p. 30) points out, quite correctly, that Vedantism, a leading philosophy of India, is an intellectualisation of a ‘reality rooted in mysticism’. Abraham Maslow, who spent the bulk of his career looking at

‘peak experiences’ (a naturalistic name for mystical experiences) writes:

The very beginning, the intrinsic core, the essence, the universal nucleus of every known high religion (unless Confucianism is also called a religion) has been the private, lonely, personal illumination, revelation, or ecstasy of some acutely sensitive prophet or seer. The high religions call themselves revealed religions and each of them tends to rest its validity, its function, and its right to exist on the codification and the communication of this original mystic experience or revelation from the lonely prophet to the mass of human beings in general. (Maslow, 2012, p. 339)

Indeed Stace, who is one of the biggest contributors to the study of mystical experience, called mystical experience ‘a psychological fact of which there is abundant evidence’. He further went on to say that, ‘To deny or doubt that it exists as a psychological fact is not a reputable opinion. It is ignorance and “very stupid”.’ (Stace, 1960: 14). Stace bases his claim, no doubt, on the historical and personal ubiquity of mystical experience. It has been a feature of our existence for thousands of years (Hamer, 2005). From the earliest emergence of humanity in the primeval muck (Hamer, 2005; Andrew Newberg et al., 2001) to our current modern experiences, mystical experience is a fact. The reality is that anywhere between 20.5 percent and 53 percent of Americans have had mystical/ religious experience (Bourque, 1969; Bourque & Back, 1971; Stark, 2008; Yamane & Polzer, 1994), and that is a conservative estimate. Abraham Maslow felt that everyone had one at one time or another:

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, pp. 340-341)

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, 1969; Bourque & Back, 1971). The educated just do not conceptualise it in the same way. Instead of using religious language and concepts they recoil from the personalised patriarch (Ecklund, 2012; Ecklund & Long, 2011) provided by employees of, for example the Catholic Church, and use secular and psychologically neutral language, characterising them as peak experiences for example (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1964, 1970)). This is worth emphasising. When we open the field, harmonise our definitions, and look at the facts we find that mystical experience is a ubiquitous human experience.

Some readers may balk at this but in fact the notion that mystical experience in particular, and spirituality more generally, remains significant and ubiquitous is backed by recent research. Despite the fact that church attendance has dropped off, atheism has not expanded significantly. Only about three percent of American's identify themselves as committed atheists, and the numbers are not that impressive anywhere else. We have nine percent in Canada, twelve percent in Norway and Germany, and a 'staggering' nineteen percent in France (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Clearly the world is not beating a pathway to the higher rationality of the atheist perspective. And if one discounts mystical experience as stupid irrationality without looking at any evidence, consider that the last ten years of neuro-scientific research has demonstrated the validity of mystical experiences (Andrew Newberg *et al.*, 2001; Andrew Newberg & Waldman, 2009). Whatever mystical/religious/occult experience happens to be, it is a thing, an important thing in fact, as we shall see, and as such should be considered an object of sustained Sociological attention.

Disengagement and Disinterest

It is interesting to note that sociologists have not always demonstrated wholesale neglect of religious/mystical experience. As far as 1940, Fursey (1940) argued for a supernatural sociology, i.e. a sociology that takes mysticism seriously. Sturzo (1942, p. 205) echoed this sentiment saying that 'If the supernatural is a historical and social fact, it must fall within the field of sociological investigation'. Still, despite the early interest, initial calls to take religion experience seriously were not met with much interest. Bourque and Back (1971) accuse sociologists of lack of curiosity and interest, and that is certainly part of it. Some (though by no means all) academics are secular liberals and they have a secular world view. Within this secular world view there is no space for non-secular phenomenon. Why would somebody who does not believe in God be interested in the mystic's claim to be in communication with God? The answer is, they would not be. Still, since many academics do indeed have a spiritual belief system of some sort, (Ecklund & Long, 2011), simple lack of interest cannot be the whole explanation. Other factors must be at play.

Beyond simple secular disbelief, part of the failure to look at the phenomenon is certainly the peculiar nature of Sociology itself. Sociology is the study of institutions, gender, social class, and other macro-phenomena, and not the study of individual experience. Individual experience is the purview of psychology and social work; mystical experience, which is highly individualist and variable (Bruce, 1996), it seen to be outside the purview of Sociology. As Bender (2010, p. 7) notes, mystical experience is largely seen as 'individual, isolated, unexpected, and thus difficult to study with sociological tools or methods'. As Bruce notes, it is axiomatic in Sociology that our sense of who we are is 'profoundly social' (Bruce, 1996, pp. 109-110). Mystical experience, which is solipsistic and isolated, violates this basic axiom. Mystics draw inspiration, knowledge, and identity not via an externalised social reality, but via an internal supra-individual experience. Thus, seemingly by definition, the mystic's experience is outside the purview of sociological inquiry.

Still, secular disbelief and sociological emphasis on collective realities are not the full explanation. Mystical experience may be individualistic, but there are aspects of the field that should be of interest to sociologists. For example, early research focused on how social position impacted how individuals understand and expressed their mystical experience (Bourque, 1969). More recently, Jantzen (1995) has examined how political and economic interests turned progressive mystical teachings into ideological props for a classist, elitist, and patriarchal status quo. My own preliminary work also carries modest sociological import. The question is, if there is something interesting to look at, why the lack of interest? Looking at the field one must conclude that it is not just secular disinterest or disciplinary boundaries but open hostility towards religious/mystical experience that keeps sociological interest in mysticism and mystical experience at bay. From Comte's attempt to develop a scientific church to replace the superstitious irrationality of the masses (Comte, 1852), through Karl Marx's rejection of religion as an opiate, through Weber's assertion that religion was a political resource, to Durkheim's seminal claim that secularisation would finally erase religion from the world, many sociologists look with nothing less than disdain and contempt at the phenomenon. In this regard mystical experience has been reduced to nothing more than an empty, or perhaps frightening, cult like phenomenon (Bruce, 1996; Wallis, 1976), and something that no self-respecting sociologists would ever consider. As (Berger, 1999, p. 4) says, it is 'dripping with reactionary supernaturalism' and 'beyond the pale at self-respecting faculty parties'.

Open hostility towards a specific phenomenon has a chilling effect that prevents scholarly exploration. And note, it is not just sociologists who express this disdain. Versluis (2007) notes all scholars, even historians, risk censure and belittlement if they express too much of an interest in the area. It is fear of persecution or, if you like, a prudent concern for their careers, that keeps scholars away. It is a totally reasonable fear. Both William James and Abraham Maslow had to spend extra time defending their interest in mystical experience against their skeptical and sometimes hostile col-

leagues. James noted that he himself '...underwent professional censure and ridicule for fervently espousing the authenticity of the spiritual orientation to mind and body, health and happiness' (Hoffman, 2010, p. 408). Some scholars, like Rupert Sheldrake, have been excommunicated from science simply for discussing a theoretical position that violated scientific cannon (Freeman, 2005). Hamer, a respected neuroscientist, was told by his former boss at the National Institute of Health, to wait until he retired to write his book *The God Gene*. As Hamer (2005, p. 207) points out, '...most scientists regard interest in spirituality and religion as a sign of bias or nonobjectivity, if not downright senility'. I myself have been repeatedly warned to tone it down by colleagues who advise me to avoid certain claims and sanitise certain statements. I do not feel altogether free to research what I find interesting, or write what I really think, because it does not fit the established parameters. Stark (1999, p. 287) tags the root of the issues:

The reason for this theoretical neglect has been that the 'causes' of revelations have seemed obvious to most social scientists: those who claim to have received revelations – to have communicated with the supernatural – are either crazy or crooked, and sometimes both....even many social scientists who will assume the rationality of more mundane religious phenomenon, find it quite impossible to accept that *normal* people can *sincerely believe* they have communicated with the divine....even the most unbiased social scientists typically have been unwilling to go further than to grant that the recipients of revelations have made honest *mistakes*, that they have *misinterpreted* an experience as having involved contact with the divine. This is taken as self-evident on the grounds that any real scientists 'knows' that real revelations are quite impossible.

Sociologists simply have a hard time believing that there is anything in mystical experience worth looking at, and for good reason. Sociologists see the truth. Religion is clearly ideological (Marx, 1978), clearly exploited for political/economic purposes (Weber, 1904 (1995)), clearly involved in social cohesion/social control (Durkheim, 1965 (1912)), and, like Freud (1964) said, clearly a infantile delusion, at least for some. Given what sociologists have discovered about religion, it is hard to convince them to take it more

seriously. You can't say, 'Yes that's all true, but you need to take a look closer anyway because inside there appears to be something there that is quite glorious'. To most sociologists a statement like that, even if toned down, makes no sense at all.

Besides a justifiable sociological disdain, a more controversial reason why sociologists find it so hard to talk about it is that scholars in general, and sociologists in particular, are intentionally turned against exploration of mystical experience. To understand why sociologists would be intentionally directed away, you have to understand, there is something profoundly revolutionary in mystical experience. Elsewhere (Sosteric, 2016a) I demonstrate how even members of top elite echelons can be 'converted' and pushed to the political left by an authentic mystical experience. Based on my research I would have to say that mystical experience leads, unless otherwise suppressed or misdirected, to a transformation in political and economic values, a transformation that sociologists, feminists, socialists, and not a few other progressive individuals and groups, might find very interesting. It is not unreasonable to state this. A revolutionary mystical socialism was expressed earlier in this century by sociologist Edward Carpenter (Carpenter, 1896; Rowbotham, 2008; Sime, 1916). What's more, the life paths of exemplars like Jesus Christ can easily be read as revolutionary tracts (Gasper, 2011). After all, Christ did totally disses rich people when he said that it was easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle than it was to get a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (i.e., have an authentic mystical experience). If the Bible, and in particular the Gospel of Luke can be believed, Christ was a low class progeny of working class roots who ignored elite rules, dismissed elites as ignorant, trashed their marketplace, treated women and outcasts with respect, converted even their soldiers to his cause, and by the end was so popular with 'the people' that they were rolling the red carpet and calling him king! As any sociologists can well imagine, this would not go over well with the ruling class. Jesus was a clear threat to the Regime of Accumulation¹ of the time, and in the hopes of shutting him down, they put him down.

If all this is true, and I think it may be, then it is

not a big leap to think that the elites infiltrated the academy in order to push an establishment agenda. It has happened before in psychology (Elkins, 2009), and sociologists may be starting to clue in to the fact that it may have happened in our space as well (Bender, 2010; Jantzen, 1995, p. 14). And it's not just sanitisation and misdirection that point to a Machiavellian elite agenda. Western spiritual traditions, all spiritual traditions I think, are bipolar. There are esoteric/secret versions for the elites and exoteric/open versions for the masses Versluis (2007), and they (i.e. the elites) are not shy about admitting it. Eckarshausen (1909) tells us that mystical wisdom is restricted to a 'small number of men'. Indeed, pervasive spiritual elitism (and just plain old fashion elitism) oozes from filiative/patriarchal institutions like Freemasonry. As any member will tell you, there is a difference between the 'chosen' ones inside the lodge and the huddled sheeple in the Churches outside. 'To initiates it is given to understand, via the hidden mysteries of nature and science, the mystery of the centre. To the uninitiated all these things are veiled in allegory', says brother Lomas (2010, p. 25). Brother Wilmhurst, in remarkably elitist/racist words, states that the mystical knowledge of Freemasonry is available only to those with '...special qualifications of mind and intention....' According to Wilmhurst a suitable candidate is 'as the word *candidus* implies, a "white man", white within as symbolically he is white-vestured without...' (Wilmhurst, 1920). Let's allow Wilmhurst to speak for himself here:

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 the purpose of 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, 1920: italics added)

Of course, saying that the masses are too stupid and uneducated to understand mystical experience,

or saying that if they had access to the power they'd blow the world up, is one explanation for the bipolar (esoteric/exoteric) nature of human spirituality. The elites hide the 'secret doctrine' away and tell themselves it is because the masses, as Jack Nicholson said, 'just can't handle the truth'. Another reason we will develop during the course of this paper.

To summarise the argument thus far, sociologists, and in particular critical sociologists, have been disinterested and disengaged from Troeltsch's third dimension, partly because the truths they see about it do not inspire confidence and partly because they have been manipulated by elites trying to prevent a closer look. And not just sociologists I should say. Scholars everywhere are deliberately discouraged from studying certain, how shall we say, explosive areas of human inquiry. These individuals cast aspersions, deny the validity of the area, name call those who are involved, undermine career success, and shut down dialog in a remarkably embarrassing (to science) way (Ecklund & Long, 2011). There is, as Bender (2010) might say, a cadre of *authorisers* going around authorising and deauthorising certain areas of inquiry. It might sound radical to some, but one only has to look at the tobacco industry, the pharmaceutical industry, and now the sugar industry to see that corporate and political elites have no trouble interfering in the activities of science. Of course, I shouldn't have to say that the scientific consequences of 'falling in line' in this fashion are, as anybody looking at the health records of those who smoke, get hooked on pharmaceutical grade opiates, or struggle with damage to the insulin system of the body, potentially quite severe.

Moving Forward

It is not my intent to bash sociology here. I really just want to point out that a) sociology has ignored an important dimension of human spirituality and b) this dimension, mystical experience, is something worthy of sociological attention. At this point I will assume that I have at least tweaked the reader's interest. With that assumption in hand I will now move on to take a closer look at how sociologists might best

approach the study of mysticism and mystical experience.

In developing any program of understanding and research, our first task is definitional. In this case we need to define mystical experience. As I have noted elsewhere (Sosteric, 2016c) there are two general approaches to defining mystical experience. The first is to reduce mystical experience to material factors, defining it by referring to biological/neurological process of the brain. The second approach is to define mystical experience by suggesting origins outside the physical body. The latter, though an increasingly acceptable option (Dossey, 2012), may be anathema to many sociologists, and that is fine. A neurological definition is an acceptable starting point. Therefore, and in line with recent research in the neurological underpinning of mystical experience, I would define mystical experience neurologically as the phenomenological experience that arises as a result of the chemical or practical suppression of the Default Mode Network (DMN) in the brain (Sosteric, 2016c).

Once we have defined mystical experience, a sociological investigation can begin. At this point several basic questions emerge, some of which we already have partial answers to. One important question is how prevalent DMN suppressions and consequent mystical experiences are. Early and conservative research puts the number between thirty and fifty percent of the population (Bourque, 1969; Yamane & Polzer, 1994) but there are some scholars, Abraham Maslow (2012, pp. 340-341) in particular felt mystical experiences were ubiquitous and that all people experience them at one time or another. Does everybody have them or is it only a certain percentage of the population? For reasons I won't get into here, my personal feeling is that the majority of people experience one or more mild to revelator mystical experience during the course of their life. I feel that conservative estimates derive from conservative/biased/insensitive instrumentation, but that when properly operationalised we would find that mystical experience is a ubiquitous human phenomenon.

The question now of course is, what is a proper

operationalisation? The *de facto* gold standard for operationalising mystical experience is the Hood Mysticism Scale (Hood, 1975). The Hood Mysticism Scale is based on the ‘excellent conceptual work’ (Hood, 1975, p. 30) of Stace (1960a) and is the most widely used (Mercer & Durham, 1999).² As ‘excellent’ as it may be, sociologists need to step carefully here since there are a number of issues that make the Hood scale, and perhaps other standard operationalisations, inappropriate for sociological use. These issues stem from Stace’s explicit rejection of forms of mystical experience which he personally found to be ‘not genuine’ (Stace, 1960a, p. 47). No sociologist will find surprising that Stace rejects as weak, unimportant, and inauthentic sensuous/kataphatic, ‘female’ type experiences. He rejects raptures (‘extreme joy [and]... violent and abnormal bodily changes’), trances, ‘hyperemotionalism’, and sexual feelings as not genuine or not examples of ‘highest expression’ of a mystic’s consciousness. We can allow him to stand for himself here:

But there can be no doubt that the abnormal bodily states which mystics call rapture or trance do sometimes occur. They are mentioned here as being of interest, but the point to be made is that they are accidental accompaniments of mystical consciousness, by no means universal or necessary. They occur among the more emotional and *hysterical mystics* and not among those of the more calm, serene, and intellectual types. They cannot therefore be regarded as belonging to the universal core of mystical experiences. (Stace, 1960a, pp. 52-53: italics added)

Stace goes on to label mystical experience with emotive and sensuous elements as soft, hysterical, unimportant, lacking in balance and judgment, and devoid of critical sensibility (Stace, 1960a, pp. 53-54). One can feminist gnashing their teeth and shaking their fists at yet another area of scholarly inquiry colonised by the patriarch’s mind, but just in case they are not, Stace says that the famous Catholic mystic St. Teresa frequently saw visions but that ‘She was not an intellectual as Eckhart was, *and not capable of much analytical or philosophical thinking*’ (Stace, 1960a, p. 49: italics added).

Given that Hood admits that he constructed his

scale in order to retain ‘face validity’ with Stace’s conceptualisations, it seems reasonable to suggest that the Hood scale represents a patriarchal wash of mystical experience and is thus inappropriate for scientific, much less sociological, use. What to do about this? I suggest that a phenomenologically based instrument, the Q-scale (Sosteric, 2016c), may be appropriate; but revising/replacing the Hood scale with a less biased instrument would be a serviceable solution as well (Sosteric, 2016b). Obviously, there is much work to be done.

Research Dimensions

Once we settle on an operationalisation, the next step is to dive in and do research. A research map would be useful in this regard. Glock and Stark (1965), as recalled by Geels and Belzen (2003), have such a map. They suggested we understand mystical experience along five dimensions. These dimensions include the experiential, ideological, ritual, intellectual, and consequential dimensions. This is a great start, but my own preference would be to replace the word ‘experiential’ with ‘phenomenological’ to focus the category more closely on the core of the mystic’s experience, which is phenomenological, and also add a historical dimension, thus leaving us with six dimensions of analysis. Let us briefly examine each starting with the phenomenological dimension.

Phenomenological Dimension

The phenomenological dimension of mystical experience is the experience of connection to something more. Studying the phenomenology of mystical experience would be like studying the emotional and intellectual dimensions of the experience of riding a roller coaster. People who have mystical experiences report ranges of intensity and quality of those experience (Sosteric, 2016c) and also report profound insight and awareness changes during and after the mystical experience (Sosteric, 2016a). On the surface, the phenomenological dimension might seem primarily the purview of psychology, but there is much

sociology to be done. For example, it is likely that social class, gender, and education impact the phenomenology of mystical experience. These typical sociological factors impact how mystical experiences are triggered, experienced, and interpreted. There are intimations of this in the scant sociological literature on this topic. For example, persons with higher socio-economic status and a more cosmopolitan orientation may tend to have experiences which are triggered by aesthetic phenomena such as beauty in nature, art, or music (Bourque, 1969, pp. 154-5). They may also be more likely to use a secular language to describe their mystical experiences. Those who harbour incipient patriarchy may, as we have seen with Stace and Hood, likely interpret their mysticism differently, imposing their patriarchy, intellectual class, and who knows what else onto their analysis and interpretation.

Besides looking at the social class, gender, and ideologically rooted variations in mystical experience, another phenomenological aspect of mystical experience that may be interesting to progressive sociologists is the noetic character of mystical connection. Noesis is a common feature of mystical experience long recognized in the literature. 'Noesis' refers to the experience of 'experience as a source of valid knowledge' (Hood, 1975; Stace, 1960a). A basic explanation of noesis is that it is a feeling of revelation, a feeling of Truth, combined with information that arises internally. The feeling is a strong, sometimes overpowering, feeling that the information is valid, authentic, and true (with a capital 'T'), despite its purely subjective nature (Hood, 1975). The information can be anything from self-knowledge through political knowledge and even cosmic knowledge. For me and for others (Harmless, 2008), the feeling of noesis in mystical experience is prominent, pervasive, and powerful.

Understanding noesis is important for sociologists for reasons that will become apparent as we continue to progress, but, it is important to step with caution here. One reason is that patriarchy, sexism, elitism, personal trauma, and even political orientation may lead to bias and error in the experience and interpretation of noetic experience. Another reason is that controlling the flow of noesis may be behind elite organisations like Freemasonry which, I would argue,

develop rituals and practices designed to facilitate mystical connection but in hermetically sealed environments where they can divert what would otherwise be progressive noetic insight and awareness. The activities of filial organisations like Freemasonry as regards mystical experience may seem inconsequential to most sociologists until we consider, as we shall in a moment, that mystical experience and the powerful noesis that often accompanies it can lead to dramatic personal, professional, and even revolutionary political transformations.

Consequential Dimension

Understanding more about the phenomenology of mystical experience leads one directly to consider the consequential dimension of mystical experience, and mystical experiences do have significant, predominantly positive and surprisingly progressive, consequences. William James (1982) and Abraham Maslow both believed in the significance and positive efficacy of spiritual experience/peak experiences (Maslow, 1962, 1968, 1970; Maslow, 1971; Maslow, 1994). As Hood Jr, Hill, and Spilka (2009) note, links between spirituality and mental and physical health have been supported by many years of research. Greeley (1975, p. 7) quoting one Professor Norman Bradburn notes there are '...no other variables...that correlate as strongly with psychological well-being as does frequent mystical experience'. But the consequences of mystical experience go deeper than just mental/emotional health; political transformations and even total transformations of identity can occur.

As regards transformation of personality and identity, mystical experiences can be deeply transformative, like being 'born again' in Christian nomenclature. Some even suggest the end point of mystical experience is the perfection of the human being. 'The Sufis have a special expression to describe this state: *al-insan al-kamil*, the perfected human' (Geels & Belzen, 2003, p. 10). The Buddhists describe it as perfect mind (Kakar, 2003, p. 109). Significant, even revolutionary, transformations of identity surely have implications across the entire span of the discipline. Consider, sociologists typically adopt

a social/interactional/reflexive view of self, the so called ‘looking glass’ view of self (Cooley, 1998). In this view, the self is constructed in social/interactional/reflexive review between the individual and society at large (Stryker, 1968). Given that mystical experience can lead to fundamental transformation in identity, the inclusion of mystical experience as an important factor in the sociological analysis and investigation of identity and self seems warranted.

The dramatic personal transformations that seem to be catalysed by mystical experiences are fascinating, but far more so is the fact that personal transformation may lead to progressive political transformations as well.³ Mystical experience may lead to what I have elsewhere called a ‘turn to the left’ (Sosteric, 2016a). Significantly, this turn to the left can lead to ‘serious disputes with representatives of orthodoxy’ (Geels & Belzen, 2003, p. 9), execution, and even crucifixion.⁴ I have already mentioned Christ as a possible martyr to the socialist cause, but there are many others out there as well. This threat is obvious to anyone who looks. Indeed, it was Troelsch who was the first to assess the threat of mystical experience, though in apparent sympathy for a potentially devastated status quo. As Garrett (1975, p. 217) notes:

...should this modern mystical phenomenon enjoy a spectacular rise in popular appeal, as Troelsch feared likely, then it would not be long before organised religion would discover its ranks depleted and its institutions in sad disarray. Plainly to Troelsch, the mystical period might very well spell the end to over two thousand years of Christian civilisation, and this disaster would redound not only to confound the future of the church but also the prospects for culture as well.

Ideological Dimension

That there are political consequences to mystical experience leads us very quickly to consider whether ideology might also be involved, and I think it is in at least three ways. First, it is involved in the way every sociologist would expect, i.e., as an opiate to control the masses (Marx, 1978), or as an archetypal ideological infrastructure for the Capitalist system (Weber, 1904 (1995)). In this case ideology is inserted into the mystical cauldron in order to spin the phenome-

non in a way that supports the status quo. This, I believe, is the story behind the western Tarot (Sosteric, 2014) which has been so successful as a tool of capitalist/mystical indoctrination that it prompted Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett (1996, p. 27) to call the tarot, which was constructed clerics and priests involved in Freemasonry in the 18th century 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.

Beyond spinning mystical experience in a way that supports the extant Regime of Accumulation, I believe ideology is involved in the sense that ideology is also used to sanitise mystical experience, divert collective attention, and prevent the masses from experiencing it. Reasons why the elites should be concerned to prevent the masses from experiencing authentic mystical experience have already been given, in particular its positive impact on mental and even physical health⁵ and the turn to the left that sometimes occurs. Even a cursory examination of masonic literature shows them to be heavily involved in controlling and shaping mystical experience (Lomas, 2010; W.L. Wilmshurst, 1924; W.L. Wilmshurst, 2007 (1922)). I have recently taken a closer look at the Christian Church and have found evidence to suggest that the Church, rather than being a representative of Christ on Earth, as its employees claim, is in fact an elite institution created to suppress the revolutionary content of Christ’s teachings. Did Jesus have a mystical experience that transformed him and made him a political revolutionary? If so, was the Church set up to stamp out his teachings? It may be an uncomfortable question for some, but I think it is an important question all the same, particularly since it clearly explains why, as even the evangelical faithful have had to admit, the Church handpicked certain texts, hid them within monastic containers, edited them (i.e., sanitized them) repeatedly, and then persecuted and even murdered those who attempted to distribute the teachings (Bock, 2006; Ehrman, 2003,

2007). Fascinating in this regard is the fate of William Tyndale who was strangled and burned by the Catholic Church for having the heretical gall to have the Latin bible translated and printed in English vernacular so that 'the people' could read it directly, without the intervention of church employees. And note the Church did not just focus its effort on stamping out revolutionary tracts. Some might say that a typical Church service is all about a priest shepherding the masses to God, but it plausible to suggest say that Church service involves a servant of the establishment taking a small passage from the Bible out of context in order to strip it of its mystical/revolutionary potential and 'spin it' in a way that confuses, diverts, and deceives.

That it is possible to limit/control/sanitise and even prevent mystical experiences was demonstrated by the work of Abraham Maslow who noted that people do not have mystical experiences (what he called peak experiences and transcendent experiences) because of one or several issues and, as a Buddhist might say, imperfections in their psychological/emotional composition.

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 Arthur 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, p. 15)

Above Maslow suggests political ideology (i.e. Marxism), bad attitude, negative character, hyper-rationality, illogic, 'dangerous femininity', fear, and ob-

session as limiting factors. Maslow may be on to something here, but surely his is a problematic statement (though when was the last time you met a Marxist who was open to discussing mystical experience). In any case, the point here is simply to underline the fact that several factors impact whether or not an individual may have or remember mystical experiences and that because of this mystical experiences are open, in an unfortunately uncontested fashion, to political manipulation.

Intellectual Dimension

Considering the phenomenological, consequential and ideological dimensions of mystical experience leads us to a consideration of the intellectual dimension. The intellectual dimension is basically the mystics' attempt to understand their experience. This intellectual dimension includes the cogitation of your average mystical sojourner as well as the exalted considerations of mystics like Meister Eckhart or the famous Catholic mystic St. Teresa. In this regard there is a lot to explain, like for example why mystics say their experience is ineffable (i.e. they can't explain it) but then 'nevertheless devote considerable time to its description and systematic analysis' (Geels & Belzen, 2003, p. 10), or why the elite interpretations provided by elite intellectuals working in lodges, seminaries, and so on has not been challenged. Sociologists' contribution may be particularly important in this area, especially when considered in the light of a) the revolutionary potential of mystical experience and b) elite interference in authentic human spirituality. In this regard, sociologists may a) help extricate intellectual understandings of mystical experience from the oozing ideological goo that surrounds it and b) help map out less ideologically corrupted directions of inquiry. I am hoping this paper serves as an example of how both a) and b) might be done.

Ritual Dimension

As one develops a certain comfort with regards the examination of mystical experience, one will be led to consider the very important ritual dimension as well.

The fact is, world religions, mystical traditions, even native spiritual rituals, all have a substantial ritual dimension. Sociologists typically see religious ritual as empty superstition, but what if it is not? What if religious rituals were intended as ways of achieving DMN suppression and mystical connection? What if current rituals are ineffective because elites, recognising the profound threat, have colonised these rituals in attempts to sanitise and divert? You do not have to go far to see this might be true. Esoteric traditions like Freemasonry are filled with techniques that, for reasons I cannot explore here, are intended to induce mystical experience, but in an environment where they are easy to manipulate. By contrast, exoteric rituals are emptied of their mystical potential, made ineffective, and offered to the masses in order to keep them compliant and impotent. In this context it is noteworthy that entheogens (what I could call connection supplements (Sosteric, 2016c)), are a major part of many indigenous religions worldwide, and also quite likely a component of elite spirituality.⁶ As such, Reagan's war on drugs, a war that emerged in response not to a 'hippy' revolution but to a mystical revolution that was threatening to undermine the Regime of Accumulation, may be reimagined as a war on mystical experience or even, as I would prefer, a war on consciousness itself.

Historical Dimension

Finally, we need to add a historical dimension to our analysis. If even a fraction of what I have suggested in this paper is true, then it is exciting to think an entire sociological history of elite interference into authentic human spirituality has yet to be written. The history is, I think, intellectually, socially, politically, and even economically explosive, but in a good way. It could change the way the entire planet understands the nature of human spirituality. It would be like opening Pandora's Box or rubbing a Genie lamp, except without the less salutary outcomes. It might even, and I do not believe this hyperbole, save the world. If I was asked to recommend one or another of these dimensions as an urgent focus, the historical dimension would be it.

Final Points

Although I would like to continue this discussion, word limitations which I have already exceeded require me to pack up and move on. For the sake of completeness, I would like to make two brief comments. The first comment regards methods and the question of how to approach a sociological study of mystical experience. Surveys have already been suggested, but all methods in the sociologist's research kit would be useful, including case studies, historical research, interview methodology, and even participant observation/ethnography. I myself have applied historical research and participant ethnography as two strategies for investigating mystical experience. No doubt, applying any of these methods to mystical experience would bring some challenge, but sociologists have never shirked from this challenge.

The second comment is a warning. While I would argue there is something important, remarkable and significant going on in the realm of mystical experience, I would also caution against the development of mystocentrism. Mystocentrism is an uncritical academic fixation on mystical experience. Mystocentrism is what happens when psychologists like Robert Alpert change their name to Ram Dass and move off to sunny California to play the rich-white guru man. Mystocentrism is the academic version of the 'it's the word of God and you shouldn't touch it' attitude. Mystocentrism occurs when we believe we cannot analyse, criticise, or interrogate mystical experience because it is 'ineffable', or when we elevate it to 'word of God' without critical sensibility. This is not harmless. Mystocentrism may be the innocent outgrowth of a naïve spirituality, or the uncritical acceptance of noetic experience, but mystocentrism is also a political strategy used by elites to *seal the temple*, so to speak. If the goal of elite ideologues is to prevent closer examination of mysticism and mystical experience, then there are two strategies they may apply. One is to deauthorise its examination, deride and dismiss it as hopeless superstition, as Berger (1999: 4) has done; the other is to elevate it to the status of 'ineffable' and advise that there is not any use taking a closer look because we will never understand it anyway. In either

case we are prevented from looking, which may be the goal. More to the point, if every time an academic has a powerful mystical experience they change their name, flee academia, and run off to California, thereby helping the elites to sanitise our university corridors, we, and by we I mean scientists, sociologists, and others will never truly understand what the heck is going on.

Conclusions

...so great is the epochal crisis of our time; encompassing both the economic and ecological crises, that nothing but a world revolution is likely to save humanity (and countless others among the earths' species) from a worsening series of catastrophes (Editorial, 2014).

This brings us to the formal end of a paper which I hope has provided a satisfactory preliminary analysis/overview of mystical experience and how it might intersect with typical sociological concerns. There is considerable research potential here, I believe enough to start a new journal entitled *The Sociology of Mysticism*. Not only that, in an era where leaders of all communities are issuing increasingly desperate calls for change, surely the fact that mystical experience may provide a foundation for such a change is significant, to say the least. I will leave it up to the reader to decide. I would like to end this paper with this quote concerning the fate, up till now, of Troelsch's third type, mysticism:

For all practical purposes in both empirical research and theoretical reflection, the initial glow of the mysticism type was snuffed out before it incurred the opportunity to shed light on religion as a sociological phenomenon. The thrust of this essay has been to suggest that this action to delete mysticism was premature. Whether the history of the full typology in sociological research would have generated decisively different and more significant findings than those of the church-sect dyad remains a question open to speculative argument. Although, certainly, the theoretical symmetry of the full typology and the contemporary promise still rooted in the third type press toward an affirmative response. What may be asserted with greater confidence, however, is that mysticism represents a significant legacy from our classical heritage in the sociology of religion. Moreover, if theoretical advancement beyond the classics is to be

obtained, such progress is only likely to occur after we have critically explored those pressing issues placed on the agenda of the discipline by its founding fathers. And seen in this light, mysticism would appear at this juncture to identify too vital a religious process and too prominent a concept in our historical tradition to leave languishing in the relative neglect which has been so patently characteristic of the career of Troelsch's third type. (Garrett, 1975, p. 221)

Garrett issued this challenge over 40 years ago. By all appearances it seems to have fallen on deaf sociological ears. Be that as it may. Hopefully now, as individuals and as a discipline, we are ready to accept the 'theoretical symmetry of the full typology', pick up this challenge, and take a closer look.

Notes

¹ This is totally off topic. I am slightly familiar with the *Regulation School*, but for reasons I will explore some other time, I link to think of the *Regime of Accumulation* as split into the *Mode of Production*, the *Mode of Accumulation*, and the *Mode of Compliance*.

² For examples of use see (Akyalcin, Greenway, & Milne, 2008; Chen, Hood, Yang, & Watson, 2011; Chen, Qi, et al., 2011; Hood Jr et al., 2001; Lazar & Kravetz, 2005; Lorencova, 2011; Maclean, Johnson, Leoutsakos, & Griffiths, 2012; Pahnke, 2012).

³ For an example, see the mystical transformation of Bartolome de las Casas, a brutal Spanish noble directly involved in the colonisation of Hispanolia and Cuba coloniser. After his mystical experience he made a 180 degree political turn and began working against colonization and slavery (Sosteric, 2016a).

⁴ A careful read of the Gospel of John reveals just how much Christ, if he existed, pissed off the local elites. The gospel records him trashing their economy, dismissing their authority, co-opting members of their police forces, and inflaming the masses.

⁵ What would the for-profit medical establishment do, for example, if the masses started healing themselves through repetitive mystical connection?

⁶ Elite spirituality, like elite boarding schools, is spirituality aimed at training/indoctrinating members (or aspiring members) of local and global elites into an authentic, but circumscribed and contained, spirituality. There are certain well understood benefits to mystical connection (better health, better insight, perhaps even higher intelligence). Elite spirituality aims to exploit the benefits of authentic spirituality for elite economic/social groupings, but in a way that doesn't trigger the 'turn to the left' (Sosteric, 2016a), and is thus not a threat to the elite status quo.

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