


Article

# Psychedelic Mysticism and Christian Spirituality: From Science to Love

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**Abstract:** The scientific claim that psychedelic drugs like psilocybin reliably occasion mystical experiences was justified using the Mystical Experiences Questionnaire (the MEQ), a survey first developed in the 1960s by Walter Pahnke using W.T. Stace's *Mysticism and Philosophy*. Scholars in Christian mysticism reject the adequacy of Stace's work for Western theistic mysticism, especially Christianity. One objection is that Stace follows William James in focusing on intense and unusual moments of mystical experience rather than the somewhat more ordinary mystical life. A greater concern is that Stace more adequately reflects non-Western traditions than Western theistic traditions like Christianity. For Stace, mysticism centers on the concept of union with external reality or with the absolute, a union in which the human creature is absorbed or fused. Christian mysticism, by contrast, involves a sense of presence rather than union, experienced in a most intimate relationship as a felt loving closeness with the divine, but not as fusion or absorption into the divine. While love of God is central to the Christian view, it is ignored in Stace and the MEQ30. Finally for Christianity, mysticism is not found in the momentary experience, but in the lifelong interpretation that leads to transformation.

**Keywords:** psychedelics; psychedelics and mysticism; psychedelics and spirituality; Mystical Experience Questionnaire; MEQ30; Christian mysticism



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## 1. Pushing Back against the Psychedelic Renaissance

Some of the sparkle has faded from the exuberance that so recently surrounded the so-called “psychedelic renaissance.” Beginning around 2022, a series of events and articles has dampened the mood among those who follow all things psychedelic. Advocates are still firmly optimistic about the medical and spiritual benefits of psychedelics, but their optimism is more cautious and guarded than it was just a few years ago.

It remains true that in early 2024, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) began its review of an application for the use of MDMA to treat post-traumatic stress disorder, and approval may come before the end of the year. Other clinical trials are underway, with growing evidence to support the view that psychedelics have medical uses. Confidence remains high that psychedelics have the potential to treat a wide range of mental health conditions, but bringing the research to the clinic is a formidable challenge. There continues to be a pattern of what is generally good news from the laboratories studying medical and scientific uses of psychedelics.

At the same time, there is a growing sense of pushback against the idea of the psychedelic renaissance, based on several concerns. One widely voiced concern is about the prevalence of challenging or difficult drug experiences. How often do they occur in research, and are they always fully reported? How frequent are they among private users, even those who prepare as carefully as they can for a safe experience? How common will they be in clinical settings if psychedelics are approved as part of psychedelic-assisted therapy, and will there be enough trained guides to provide the help that may be needed?

Another concern has to do with accusations of problems in professional ethics or scientific misconduct. Whether there is substance to the accusations is unknown, but

the fact that they are aired publicly in the *New York Times* is worrisome (Borrell 2024). Longstanding concerns have been raised about the role of money in the field. Everyone knows that it costs millions if not billions of dollars to bring a drug through the regulatory process, sums beyond the range of private philanthropy. To make psychedelics mainstream, it is necessary to make them medical—that is, to demonstrate their health benefit using the standard methods of medical research. And to make them medical, it is necessary to make them commercial. Even if that reasoning holds, it is not exactly clear where it will lead. What will be the effect on the field of the use of for-profit funding sources, proprietary research, patenting of variant forms of psychedelics, and commercialization of clinics?

The commercialization of psychedelics stands in sharp contrast to the spiritual/psychedelic traditions of Indigenous peoples, who safeguarded the knowledge and the healing use of various plant medicines for millennia. Despite efforts by colonial empires and church authorities, this knowledge survived but is now being exploited. If there is a renaissance here, it is not the rediscovery of the achievements of classical Greece or Rome but the extraction and appropriation of the treasures that lie in the knowledge of these substances and their therapeutic uses.

A final concern adding to the headwinds pushing against the idea of a psychedelic renaissance has to do with the place of mysticism in science. For some in the field of psychedelic science, mysticism is overtly religious and has no place in the methods or laboratories of science. Dissatisfaction of a different sort comes from scholars trained in religion and theology, not because mysticism is being connected to psychedelics, but because of how it is being measured with a questionnaire derived largely from the philosophy of W.T. Stace, a questionnaire known as the Mystical Experience Questionnaire or the MEQ. For religion scholars, the chief problem is perennialism—the view that there is a common, universal mystical experience. For those trained in theology, especially Christianity, the problem is that Stace’s categories, while claiming to be universal, leave out Christian mystical traditions.

## 2. The Mysticism of the MEQ

Although the Mystical Experience Questionnaire or MEQ has been modified several times, its questions and categories date back to 1962. On Good Friday of that year, Walter Pahnke, a pioneer in the study of psychedelic spirituality, conducted his famous “Marsh Chapel” experiment. To show that psilocybin experiences are positively correlated with some sort of spiritual or mystical experience, Pahnke drew upon the 1960 publication *Mysticism and Philosophy* by the philosopher W.T. Stace (Stace 1960). Other sources were influential at the time, such as William James’s classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 2004), Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism* (Underhill 1961), and Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception* (Huxley 1954). Huxley was already well known for his views on perennialism, which holds to a universal core for all human religious experiences. It was Stace, however, who provided the key vocabulary and categories for Pahnke’s questionnaire. The “operational definition was provided by Stace (1960), and formed the basis of different versions of the Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ), which was developed to evaluate the occurrence and character of individual, discrete mystical experiences occasioned by classic hallucinogens” (Barrett et al. 2015, p. 2).

Stace distinguishes between what he calls extrovertive and introvertive mysticism. The extrovertive type centers on the sense of unity with outside things. The introvertive is experienced as a loss of the self. Under these two broad categories, Stace identifies seven characteristics of mystical experience. Pahnke drew on Stace and others to create a scale based on eight categories. “The categories include (1) sense of unity, (2) transcendence of time and space, (3) sense of sacredness, (4) sense of objective reality, (5) deeply felt positive mood, (6) ineffability, (7) paradoxicality and (8) transiency” (Doblin 1991, p. 7). Doblin adds that “Pahnke arbitrarily determined that for a mystical experience to be considered complete for the purposes of the experiment,” the total score and the score in each of the eight categories needed to be at least 60% of the maximum possible (Doblin 1991, p. 10).

A research team led by Kurt Stocker has provided a helpful review of the history of the MEQ from its earliest complete form in 1975 until the present version (Stocker et al. 2024). The questionnaire was developed by Walter Pahnke and then modified in collaboration with William Richards, who has been key to its modifications and its continued use ever since. After a pause in psychedelic research that lasted several decades, the scientific study of the spiritual dimensions of psychedelic experiences was restarted using an updated version of Pahnke's survey. In the landmark 2006 article by a team of researchers at Johns Hopkins University, the revised MEQ was the basis for the claim that "when administered to volunteers under supportive conditions, psilocybin occasioned experiences similar to spontaneously occurring mystical experiences and which were evaluated by volunteers as having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance" (Griffiths et al. 2006, p. 282). Pahnke's original categories and questions were revised, but "the mystical items have remained largely consistent since the inception of the MEQ" in the work of Walter Pahnke (MacLean et al. 2012, p. 4). The claim made in the 2006 study that "50% of participants who received psilocybin met the criteria for a complete mystical experience" is based directly on Pahnke's somewhat arbitrary threshold for what would count as "complete" (Griffiths et al. 2006, p. 281).

Further revisions to the MEQ have led to today's 30-item survey, the current MEQ30 (Roseman et al. 2019, p. 7). "The four factors of the MEQ30 are: mystical (including items from the internal unity, external unity, noetic quality, and sacredness scales of the MEQ43), positive mood, transcendence of time and space, and ineffability (all three of which include items from their respective MEQ43 scales)" (Barrett et al. 2015, p. 2).

The first of these four factors—the mystical—brings together Stace's introvertive and extrovertive dimensions, combining them with the two key hallmarks of mysticism according to William James: its noetic quality and ineffability. The MEQ uses the language of internal and external unity in place of the introvertive/extravertive in Stace, but the corresponding descriptions are indebted to Stace. Internal unity is based on study participants reporting things like "experience of unity with ultimate reality" or the "experience of the fusion of your personal self into a larger whole." External unity, on the other hand, rests on such things as a "experience of oneness or unity with objects and/or persons perceived in your surroundings" (Roseman et al. 2019, p. 7).

The current MEQ with just 30 items, however, prompts Stocker's group to ask this question: "Is psychedelically occasioned mystical experience captured comprehensively in the current state of research?" (Stocker et al. 2024, p. 81). In their view, the reduction to 30 questions leaves out important features of the mystical aspects of psychedelic experiences. If so, then "Which questionnaire should a psychedelic researcher/therapist use if she or he wants to measure psychedelic experience comprehensively?" (Stocker et al. 2024, p. 97). The goal of thoroughness must be balanced with efficiency, and right now there is no single survey that manages to achieve both goals. "Hopefully, future psychedelic research will bring about such a tool" (Stocker et al. 2024, p. 97).

While the MEQ avoids anything that looks like the specific religious beliefs of a particular faith tradition, the word "mystical" in the title is enough to ring alarm bells for some experts in psychedelic science. So are the claims, published in standard science and medical journals, that substances like psilocybin reliably occasion mystical experiences. It is a well-known fact, of course, that people taking psychedelic drugs often have intense experiences. These can be monitored in real time using brain imaging. When asked, people often describe these experiences as highly meaningful, and they often use words like "mystical" or "spiritual" to describe what they felt. Scientists can gather data about these things without going beyond the limits of empirical science. Some researchers claim that they remain agnostic about the content of the claims, reporting only the fact that the claims are made, noting under what conditions they may be made or what correlations there might be between these claims and, say, mental health benefits. All of this is within the purview of science.

Other researchers in the field, however, are concerned that the use of the MEQ seems to invite descriptions that employ mystical or religious notions. They also worry that scientific study about religion can be seen as a scientific endorsement of religion. Sanders and Zijlmans, for example, point to the “risks and difficulties stemming from the scientific use of a framework associated with supernatural or nonempirical belief systems.” They recommend what they call “a demystified model of the psychedelic state” (Sanders and Zijlmans 2021, p. 1253). Finally, some researchers worry that a few of their colleagues may be motivated by the desire to offer support not just for the fact of human spiritual experience, but for its spiritual benefits.

The term “mystical experience” is especially troubling to some, who think “it suggests associations with the supernatural that may be obstructive or even antithetical to scientific method and progress” (Carhart-Harris and Goodwin 2017). Some single out the MEQ as part of the problem. Sanders and Zijlmans warn against anything that might plant ideas of mysticism among research volunteers:

When we administer a mystical experience questionnaire, we invite participants to interpret their experience through the framework of mysticism. Thus, we risk creating biased data and may fail to learn from participants’ own articulation and interpretation. . . We are concerned that if science states that psychedelics induce mystical experiences that are key to their therapeutic action, this is too easily misinterpreted as research advocating a role for the supernatural or divine.

(Sanders and Zijlmans 2021, p. 1254)

Scientists are not the only ones to raise questions about the MEQ. The views of Stace upon which the MEQ depends are largely dismissed today by scholars of religion and theological scholars alike. Scholars of religion typically hold academic positions in university departments of religion. They stand outside creedal traditions and study the human phenomenon of religion in general. Within their academic community, nearly everyone is dismissive of perennialism, which comes more explicitly from Huxley than Stace, but has found its way into the study of psychedelic spirituality. Perennialism’s claim of a universal core of human spiritual experience lacks empirical evidence, they argue. In its place, most scholars in religion adopt a version of contextualism, which holds that descriptions of mystical experiences are mostly if not entirely explained by the context. A Christian will draw on Christian symbolism, a Muslim on Islam, and so forth. Of course, people sometimes describe their experiences cross-culturally, but nearly everyone today is aware of spiritual or religious symbols from various traditions beyond their own.

Theological scholars, by contrast, tend to hold university appointments in divinity or in independent seminaries. They concentrate their efforts on understanding their own tradition at the deepest possible level. While they may identify with the tradition they study, their stance is critical and always aimed at an advanced level of understanding and interpretation. To my knowledge, no theological scholar in the Christian tradition has so far offered a point-by-point commentary on the MEQ and its use in psychedelic research, and it is not our goal here to do so. Here, we aim simply to summarize a few of the defining features described by the leading experts in the Christian mystical tradition to compare Christianity with the tradition of W.T. Stace and the MEQ.

### 3. Differences between Christian Mystical Traditions and the MEQ

Dissatisfaction with Stace’s categories is common among Christian scholars of mysticism. In a recent summary article, William Wainwright writes that “Stace’s typology has been widely influential, [but] it oversimplifies and thereby distorts the richness of mystical experience” (Wainwright 2021, p. 1). Part of the problem goes back to William James, who directs attention to the subjective states of mystical experience rather than to the mystical/spiritual way of life in relationship to a divine reality that is central to the Christian tradition. Grace Jantzen points to this change from classical mysticism to William James: “The definition of mysticism has shifted, in modern thinking, from a patristic emphasis on

the objective content of experience to the modern emphasis on the subjective psychological states or feelings of the individual" (Jantzen 1989, p. 295).

Jantzen objects to the way that James redirects the focus of generations of scholars towards what she calls "the fringes of consciousness: psychic phenomena, hallucinations, the effects of nitrous oxide and intoxication, and intense or bizarre accounts of religious experience including trances, levitations, seizures, hallucinations, and the like" (Jantzen 1989, p. 296). When it comes to describing mysticism and giving examples, James lists "particular states of consciousness: dream-like states, trances, an experience with chloroform, flashes of exaltation, experiences of ecstatic union. These, for James, are 'mystical experiences', and it is to experiences of these sorts that he applies his famous characteristics of ineffability, noetic quality, passivity, and transiency." Stace, of course, modifies the list of defining characteristics, but he remains in the tradition of James in thinking about mysticism "in terms of experiences in this narrower sense: voices, visions, ecstasies, and the like" (Jantzen 1989, p. 302).

### 3.1. *Loving Presence vs. Union*

An even more important difference between Stace and Christian mysticism, however, lies at the level of theology and theistic ontology. One strength of Stace's treatment is that he directs the attention of Western scholars to Eastern sources, so much so that he turns from the theism of the West to the more typically monistic views found in Eastern spiritual traditions. In practical terms, what this means for Stace is that the mystic seeks union, either introvertive or extravertive. For the mystic in theistic traditions like Christianity, however, the goal of the mystical life is not monistic union, but a felt sense of the presence of the sacred. The divine or the holy always remains the holy other, ontologically distinct from all creatures and eternally so. The presence of the divine may be sensed or felt, and it may be loved. Monistic union implies oneness. Theistic presence involves love, which even at its most intimate intensity always implies otherness. It is not that Christian mystics entirely avoid terms like oneness or union, but their point in using them is to signify closeness or intimacy, not fusion. By contrast, Stace defines the mystical in terms of monistic union, neglecting the sense of the presence of the divine together with the significance of love.

Wainwright identifies this point of difference as the distinctive feature of Western theistic mysticism, grounded specifically its understanding of union as a loving relationship rather than a fusion. "What most clearly differentiates theistic mystical consciousness from other forms of mystical experience, however, is that the nature of the relation between the mystic and the object of her experience is best indicated by the fact that she typically expresses it by employing the language of mutual love" (Wainwright 2021, p. 2). With that thought in mind, Wainwright goes right to heart of the inadequacy of Stace's interpretation, to the extent that it is seen as inclusive of world mysticism. According to Wainwright, "The major difficulty with an account like Stace's, however, is its failure to mention love" (Wainwright 2021, p. 1). The same is true of the MEQ30. This is not to say that research participants do not mention love, and it should be noted that William Richards, a key developer of the MEQ, "also considers experiencing 'Love' to be a part of what is regarded as 'a complete mystical experience'" (Stocker et al. 2024, p. 85).

To ignore love is to ignore the most common feature of Christian mystical and spiritual traditions. Bernard McGinn, widely seen as the world's leading scholar of the mystical element within Christianity, puts it this way: "It is extremely difficult to find any Christian theology of mysticism which is not affective in the sense of giving love a crucial role in our striving toward God" (McGinn 1987, p. 12). As Wainwright describes it, Stace distinguishes between nature mysticism and monistic mysticism, neither of which is inclusive of theistic mysticism. "Nature mysticism and monistic mysticism are roughly identical with Stace's extrovertive and introvertive mysticism. Theistic mysticism, on the other hand, can't be accommodated within Stace's categories." That is because "unlike monistic consciousness, theistic mystical consciousness has an object or content which is distinct from the self." The

core of mysticism within Christianity is the felt sense of the presence and the shared love between the human person and the holy, intimate other.

Sometimes, it is suggested that the universal essence of mysticism is a search for union with the transcendent ground of being. McGinn rejects this idea as a description of the mystical element within Christianity, insisting instead that “union with God is not the most central category for understanding mysticism” (McGinn 1991, p. xvii). Union with the divine might be an appropriate description of mysticism in other contexts. To describe the core of Christian mysticism, however, McGinn prefers the word “presence.” He writes: “I have come to find the term ‘presence’ a more central and a more useful category for grasping the unifying note in the varieties of Christian mysticism.” If asked to offer a definition of the mystical element in Christianity, McGinn describes it as “that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God” (McGinn 1991). Elsewhere he writes of an “immediate consciousness of the presence of God,” suggesting that this is “a central claim that appears in almost all mystical texts” (McGinn 1991).

When Christian mystics do speak of uniting with God, as they sometimes do, the kind of uniting they ordinarily have in mind is based on the metaphor of matrimonial unity, which symbolizes the most intimate union of two who remain distinct even in their unity. Part of the problem here is that the word “union” can mean fusion or relationship, and there is a world of difference between the two. Christian mystics avoid notions of fusion or absorption. Christianity recognizes that egocentrism is a problem, calls pride a sin, and exhorts everyone to let go of a me-first attitude and to enter instead into a state of compassionate solidarity with others, including nature and the divine. Selfishness is a thing to be annihilated, but not the self. When the mystic senses the presence of the divine, the importance of the self is diminished, but the creaturely goodness of the self is never denied. For the Christian mystic, the spiritual path is an experiential process of being loved graciously by God, of loving God bounteously in return, and of loving all things, including our enemies, as God loves them.

### *3.2. Experiential Process vs. Transient Event*

One of William James’s identifying hallmarks of mystical experience is transience, by which he means that even if time seems to be suspended momentarily, the experiential peak itself lasts only a few minutes, possibly a few hours at most. This seems to fit nicely with what we know of the peak component of intense psychedelic experiences. The moment of greatest intensity might be a few hours long, during which the psychedelic substances are most disruptive in their action on various neurotransmitters such as serotonin. A more complete description of the neurological effects of psychedelics, however, suggests that the peak is only one part of the entire process of drug action. By stimulating the production of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), the action of psychedelics in the brain continues past the peak, stretching for weeks or longer as the brain undergoes the development and the integration of new neurons (Reardon 2023, p. 23). By stimulating neurotransmitters, psychedelics act quickly and dramatically in ways that are subjectively intense and seem to bring almost immediate mental health benefits. By contributing to neurogenesis and neuroplasticity, however, psychedelics act in ways that keep on acting for weeks, even for years. Their action is both fast-acting and long-lasting.

At times and for various purposes, it may make sense to focus on the moments of subjective intensity as the “mystical experience” and to leave aside the longer processes of psychedelic action. A Christian view of mysticism, however, invites us to concentrate somewhat less on the transient moment of intensity and more on the drawn-out process of transformation. Biologically, the drugs are still doing their work. Psychologically and spiritually, transformation is occurring. The MEQ, however, is focused on the intense experience, and even when it is administered retrospectively after some months have passed, it invites research volunteers to recall the peak moment of their past experiences rather than the process of their ongoing mystical experiential transformation.

On the relative importance of peak moments versus transformative processes, McGinn writes that “it is important to remember that mysticism is always a process or way of life. Although the essential note—or better, goal—of mysticism may be conceived of as a particular kind of encounter between God and the human, between Infinite Spirit and the finite human spirit, everything that leads up to and prepares for this encounter, as well as all that flows from or is supposed to flow from it for the life of the individual in the belief community, is also mystical, even if in a secondary sense” (McGinn 1991). If everything before and after the peak is “also mystical” and the MEQ leaves it out, then the MEQ falls short as a measurement of Christian mystical experience. The entire passage is a mystical process, and what leads to it or follows from it should not be ignored as if it were not part of the main event.

One reason why this is important is that the Christian experiential mystical process is a *critical* process that involves a kind of dialogue with a rich and complex faith tradition. In a sense, it is like taking the work of psychedelic integration to a whole new level. Generally speaking, the work of integration is the effort to make sense of the moment of intensity in the context of our lives as a whole. Christian integration and interpretation bring another dimension to the conversation. The moment in its revelatory power, the contours of life as a whole, and the insights of an ancient and slightly complicated faith tradition are all brought together into an ongoing, triadic conversation. The process is mutually critical because the three sources of insight—the key moment, life as a whole, and the insights of faith—make claims that jostle against each other amidst life’s other demands. The point is to have the courage to begin the unpredictable process of comprehending our key experiences and our whole life as a Christian journey in response to the gracious and transformative presence of an unexpected love.

No one, of course, is under any obligation to interpret their mystical moment in relation to any philosophy or faith tradition, such as Christianity. Many people will find that to be a needless complication. People today have plenty of reasons for rejecting religion in general and Christianity in particular. A few, however, may take a chance that an old path might just be adaptable to a new situation. If so, then the resources and values of the Christian tradition might come into play.

#### 4. From Integration to Interpretation

In the context of psychedelic-assisted therapy, the idea of integration plays a key role. In 2024, the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) released an online resource entitled the MAPS Psychedelic Integration Handbook, a free resource anyone can use with or without professional help. The handbook begins with this definition: “The process of integration involves making sense of and incorporating the insights, emotions, and changes that may arise during a psychedelic journey into your everyday life. Integration is an essential aspect of the psychedelic experience because these substances can bring about intense and often challenging insights, emotions, and shifts in perspective” (Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies n.d.).

The handbook expands its definition by pointing to various dimensions of human experiences, including spiritual dimensions, and then it offers this advice: “Regardless of your specific beliefs (or lack thereof), we encourage you to consciously and intentionally explore how your experiences relate to the domain of Spirit during your periods of integration” (Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies n.d.). This process of exploration of the spiritual significance of the psychedelic experience can be undertaken alone or with close friends, with a trained spiritual director, or by tapping into a community that is open to the work of supporting those with psychedelic spiritual experiences. Obviously, if another human being is involved in the process of spiritual integration, that person’s views will influence the outcome. Trained chaplains learn to recognize their personal beliefs and to keep them in check to respect the autonomy of their clients. If the person entering the integration process is drawing on a friend for feedback, it may be because the viewpoint is probably already valued.

From the perspective of Christianity, our whole lives consist of overlapping processes of integration of experiences with beliefs, values, commitments, and goals. Experiences come in wildly different forms and can be accompanied by feelings that are almost diametrically opposed to each other, running the entire emotional gamut from bliss to terror, comforting presence to hopeless abandonment, and forgiveness to shame. The experiences we call mystical usually involve a sense of the presence of God, but the presence of the holy is not always gentle or comforting. It can be terrifying. It is never bland or banal. Making sense of it all, with its chaotic hodgepodge of experiential qualities and feelings, can seem like an impossible task, not a simple one-off project of integration that we complete for our therapist so that we can move on to the next thing.

The person seeking help in integration may turn to a community or religious tradition such as Christianity or some faith tradition. The kind of help offered there is different from other sources. It might come in the form of a highly trained psychedelic spiritual director, but such people are rare and only now beginning to be visible aboveground. Ordinary congregations are visible enough, but what is offered there is not specialized. It is the ordinary, generalized forms of support available to everyone. It comes through participating in the activities, liturgies, and rituals of a community and by drawing on its beliefs about the grace of God and the human response of love.

Some may hold back from contacting a Christian community, expecting that the response to psychedelic spiritual experiences from Christian churches or their leaders will be disinterest or condemnation. Others might test the waters, realizing the local congregations and their leaders may differ greatly from each other in their openness to someone who talks about a psychedelic spiritual experience. Two religious networks offer support for leaders and congregations who want to learn more about the spiritual significance of psychedelic experiences and how to interpret the meaning of these experiences within the context of established tradition. The Ligare network is “a Christian Psychedelic Society” ([ligare.org](http://ligare.org) accessed on 11 April 2022), and Shefa offers “Jewish psychedelic support” ([shefaflow.org](http://shefaflow.org) accessed on 11 April 2022). Both organizations can help people find supportive contacts.

Whatever the institutional pathway that connects a psychedelic spiritual seeker with a local community of faith, the seeker will come to see that a congregation is a kind of social container that holds a richly diverse set of ideas that have worked for some in the past. Not everything fits everyone, which is why faith communities often seem to disagree so much with each other. At their best, what they offer is spacious and accommodating, a tangible link to at least some of the strands in humanity’s long history of spirituality, and a constant reminder of new spiritual growth ahead.

Half a century ago, the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner famously said that “the Christian of the future will be a mystic or [they] will not exist at all.” To be a Christian is to be a mystic, one who senses the presence of divine love. Rahner claimed that mystics are not a rare or endangered species. Everyone can have authentic spiritual experiences, he insisted, and being a mystic is a possibility that is always close at hand for everyone who interprets the experience as spiritual encounter. Then, almost as if he is thinking ahead to our time when psychedelic use will lead to widespread access to intense spiritual experiences, Rahner advises us that mysticism is not defined by an isolated moment, but by the totality of an experiential process of life, claiming that “by mysticism we mean, not singular parapsychological phenomena, but a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence” (Rahner 1974, p. 148).

What Rahner suggests is that mysticism is normal for all Christians, or at least it should be. Mystics are not exotic spiritual geniuses. Mystical experiences are not mostly weird, paranormal, or rare. Some may be intense or disruptive, but more often they come in moments of quiet reflection, the spontaneous “wow” of awe, a feeling of unexplainable joy, or the sudden conviction that despite how awful everything may be, in the end all shall be well, as the 14th century Julian of Norwich so confidently reassures us.

Everyone, Rahner insists, can have such experiences in which there is a palpable sense of the presence of the holy. What makes them “Christian” is not that they happen in church



or that an angel or a saint appears. Making them Christian is a decision, and it rests in an even more fundamental choice to interpret one's whole life with the language and the concepts of Christian spiritual traditions. It rests in a willingness to return again and again to a path through integration to participation and on to transformation. We could speak of it as "deep integration."

In Christianity, the challenge of interpretation is compounded by the fact that the sense of the presence of the divine does not bring intellectual or theological clarity. In fact, it can disrupt what once was clear, somewhat akin to the way in which some researchers suggest that psychedelics work because they relax the grip of prior ideas and beliefs, setting us free from the ideas that hold us back (Carhart-Harris and Friston 2019). This fits nicely with what Christians have said over the centuries about those moments in which they feel they have had some sort of moment of mystical intensity. Sometimes, the ideas that hold us back are religious in origin. Feelings of shame, guilt, or rejection can imprison us, especially when they are tied to theologically rigid dogmas that are more than ripe for a good shaking. Nothing can unsettle ideas about divine judgment like an encounter with a gracious divine presence. As McGinn puts it, the life of the mystic is a "response to the presence of God, a presence that is not open, evident, or easily accessible, but that is always in some way mysterious or hidden" (McGinn 1987, p. 7). The "presence that is not open" can shake up confidence in convictions that are based on prejudice, dogma, or church authority.

Far from giving us conceptual clarity, the experience of a divine encounter can undermine our previous theological beliefs by convincing us that while God may be present, God's essence is unknowable, encountered in love but inaccessible in knowledge. According to McGinn, "Christian mystical theology is based upon the twin premises of the unknowability of God on the one hand and God's accessibility to love on the other" (McGinn 1987, p. 12).

McGinn is far from alone in asserting the unknowability of God in Christian mystical theology. One of Rahner's most repeated phrases is "incomprehensible mystery," speaking of the God who is always closer than we imagine, but whose essence escapes our analysis. In the early fifth century, Augustine of Hippo put it succinctly when he said: "*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*," usually translated as "If you comprehend it, it is not God" (Grondin 2017). It is not that God is utterly unknown, but what is known is the gracious presence and the love, not the essence. The closer we come to a sense of the presence of the divine, the more we find that our sense of wonder is set free.

## 5. Conclusions

Stace leaves out love, according to his critics in Christian mysticism, and thereby he ignores what is central in the Christian mystical tradition. The MEQ30 uses the word "unity" three times and "fusion" once, but it omits "love."

There are significant differences between what the MEQ counts as mystical experience and what Christianity recognizes as the mystical or spiritual element within its own tradition. This is not to suggest that the MEQ fails to measure something that can be called mystical, or that it is not aligned with other traditions, but that it is not fine-tuned to measure what is most characteristic of Christian spirituality. At this point in the history of research, continued use of the MEQ has the advantage of validation through repeated use. It reliably predicts certain mental health outcomes (Barrett et al. 2015).

It may even be seen as advantageous that the MEQ is not defined by Western, theistic, or specifically Christian categories. If it were constructed to match theistic mysticism and not to other traditions, its use in the Western context could be seen as problematic. Most study participants probably find the MEQ to be neutral and somewhat "secular," which is fitting for a setting that values pluralism and cultural neutrality. Even so, pushback against its use by researchers suggests that an even more secular, "demystified" questionnaire might be needed. Christianity has nothing to lose in such a revision, because it has nothing of value to protect in the MEQ. All religions, in fact, can find encouragement in the work of

researchers who use the MEQ to point to a reliable correlation between psychedelics and spiritual experiences.

Participants in psychedelic research that uses the MEQ may find it interesting to reflect for a moment about how the questionnaire defines mystical experience. The more important point, however, is that today's research participants and the much larger numbers that are expected to follow once psychedelic-assisted therapy is up and running should all feel the freedom to define their experience for themselves, deciding on their own whether the experience is meaningful, spiritual, or compatible with a religious tradition. If it is true that the MEQ is not especially well suited for various Christian mystical traditions, then anyone who scores relatively low on its scales should not feel the least bit disappointed.

Where the MEQ asks volunteers whether they had an "experience of pure being and pure awareness," an alternative more attuned to Christian mysticism might ask whether they felt the presence of a loving being. Or where the MEQ asks about an "experience of unity with ultimate reality," an alternate question might ask about an experience of a close or loving relationship with ultimate reality. At a linguistic level, these alternatives in wording seem minor, even trivial. Theologically, however, the differences are profound.

When it comes to individuals, the MEQ30 is not a pass/fail test. It is an invitation to reflection. Anyone in any tradition or no tradition who has a profoundly meaningful experience with psychedelics is very likely to find more than a few statements in the MEQ that express exactly how they feel about their experience. The feature of ineffability that James identifies and so many people experience is reflected in these words: "Sense that the experience cannot be described adequately in words." The item most reflective of certain aspects of the Christian tradition is this: "Freedom from the limitations of your personal self and feeling a unity or bond with what was felt to be greater than your personal self" (Roseman et al. 2019, p. 7).

Whatever its limitations might be, the MEQ has flagged something important. Psychedelics are positively correlated with mystical experiences. Once our wider culture sees this, we cannot unsee it. Like mystical experience itself, we cannot predict where it might take us.

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