“Mystical Experiences”

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Mystical experiences are a type of religious experience. There are many kinds of religious experience. Indeed, the title of philosopher and psychologist William James’ seminal book in this area is *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Generally speaking, religious experiences are experiences that can be characterized in religious terms. What counts as a “religious” term is a matter of debate. But clear cases include those that concern divine reality of some sort or another such as ‘God’ and human connection with divine reality such as ‘worship,’ and ‘prayer.’

Of course, there are many conceptions of the divine. But there are two general categories into which these conceptions are often placed: personal and impersonal.

In the Abrahamic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, God is a personal being. A personal being is a conscious agent with whom humans can have a personal relationship. And a personal relationship is a relationship between subjects capable of conscious thought and agency. These personalistic religious traditions are often labeled “dualistic,” since God and the human person in relationship with God maintain their separate identities as two distinct beings.

In contrast, Hinduism and Buddhism, the two major religious traditions that originated on the Indian subcontinent, do not characterize ultimate reality in terms of a personal divine agent. In Hinduism, the divine is impersonal. And in Buddhism, ultimate reality is not divine. These impersonalistic religious traditions are often labeled “monistic,” since they regard reality as ultimately one, and the appearance of a multiplicity of distinct individuals—including humans—an illusion.

In spite of these different ways of thinking about ultimate reality and the divine, many adherents of each of these five long-standing major religious traditions have reported experiences that count as religious. And many of the reported religious experiences qualify as mystical. The same is true of experiences reported by people from many more recent and less prominent religions—and even some experiences had by people who don’t consider themselves religious.

I will be focusing in this chapter on religious and mystical experiences in the Judeo-Christian tradition—for two reasons. First, it is the tradition with which I am most familiar both intellectually and experientially. And second, it would be hard to do justice to every religious tradition in a short essay.

In addition, my central aim is to reflect on mystical experience as a basis for knowing God. Philosophical questions about knowing God fall into the category of religious epistemology.

**The Epistemology of Religious Belief: Knowing God**

In his high priestly prayer, recorded in John 17, Jesus prays “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

(v. 3). But how can we know God? That’s the main question in the epistemology of religious belief.

To answer the question, we can start by thinking about the various possible answers to questions of the form “How can we know X?” Clearly, answers to this general sort of question depend on what kind of thing X is. If X is a physical object, our knowledge of it will be rooted in empirical observation. If X is a logical truth, knowing it will involve an exercise of reason. But God is neither a physical object nor an abstract proposition. God is a personal being. So, our knowledge of God will require a method suitable for knowing persons.

Before deciding which method will be best, we need to make another distinction. Are we seeking knowledge *about* God or knowledge *of* God? Both are required for knowing God as completely as humanly possible. But from a biblical point of view, the latter is more basic. What Jesus had in mind by knowing God was knowing God personally and directly rather than impersonally and indirectly.

Knowledge is impersonal when what is known is conceived as an object of thought describable in a third-person manner. Knowledge is indirect when what is known is known on the basis of knowing something else. For instance, we can know about Jesus of Nazareth on the basis of the historical record of his life, death, and resurrection in the Gospels. We know about him (impersonally) by means of knowing (indirectly) what others have written about him.

One way to acquire impersonal and indirect knowledge of God is by means of natural theological arguments for God’s existence and in support of claims about God’s nature. The classical theistic arguments (cosmological, teleological, ontological, and moral) are the main philosophical tools of this sort. These arguments purport to prove that there is a First Cause of the universe or cosmos who is the Intelligent Designer of it, a Perfect Being, and a Moral Lawgiver. So, they are intended to provide a rational basis for knowledge about God’s existence, relation to the universe, general nature, and will.

But knowing a person personally and directly requires acquaintance with that person. And acquaintance with a person requires encountering him or her. So, knowing God personally and directly involves being acquainted with God through encountering God. Of course, encountering something doesn’t result in knowledge of it unless you are at least somewhat aware of it when you come into contact with it. So, knowledge of God requires awareness of God.

But one can encounter God with awareness of God without knowing that one is encountering *God*. That is, one’s direct and personal knowledge of God can be merely *de re* (referential and objectual) and not also *de dicto* (conceptual and propositional). In the former case, one is in direct contact with God and one is conscious of God as a direct object of one’s awareness. But one doesn’t conceptualize the object of one’s awareness *as* God (even if one already has a concept of God). In the latter case, one applies one’s concept of God to the object—or better, *subject*—one is experiencing. An example of the former kind of case is Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the risen Christ when she thought he was the gardener (John 20:14-15). And Thomas’s encounter with the risen Christ illustrates both—the former when Jesus first appears to him and the latter when Thomas sees Jesus’s wounds and exclaims “My Lord and my God” (John 20:26-28).

From the standpoint of biblical theism, *de dicto* direct and personal knowledge of God is superior to mere *de re* direct and personal knowledge of God. The full counsel of the Christian scriptures makes it clear that contact with God devoid of knowledge about God is inadequate to support the kind of relationship God intends to have with humans. In Acts 17, Paul tells his Areopagus audience more about the “unknown God” they worship (v. 23). Whatever they knew on the basis of general revelation required supplementation by God’s special revelation in Jesus Christ. But again, mere knowledge about God will not suffice. Paul says God’s plan is for humans to “search for Godand perhaps grope for him and find him” (v. 27). “Groping” implies desire for direct contact.

Clearly, if God is an infinite and perfect being, then finite and imperfect humans are not able to know God completely. We are not able to know every truth about God. And we are not able to know God personally and directly so thoroughly that we have exhausted the knowledge of God it is logically possible to have.

But even what we can know about God and even the character of our direct acquaintance with God may be imperfect to a greater or lesser extent. Both the propositional content of our knowledge about God and the phenomenological content of our experiential knowledge of God may be somewhat distorted. Our thoughts about God may represent him imperfectly and our reception of God’s self-presentation to us may fail to capture what God presents of himself in a fully faithful way.

Our thoughts about God and the language we use to express those thoughts are analogically related to the divine realities those thoughts and those uses of language are about. That is, what we think about God and what we say about God are both like and unlike God as he really is. For instance, when we think and say that God is good, we are thinking and saying that God is like good things with which we are familiar on the basis of our ordinary human experience. But God’s goodness is also unlike those familiar good things. Our concept of goodness is not univocally related to God’s goodness (it is not exactly the same) or equivocally related to God’s goodness (it is not completely different).

And since our knowledge about God depends on our thoughts about God, our knowledge of God is analogically (rather than univocally or equivocally) related to God’s nature.

Our partial knowledge about God’s goodness does not perfectly represent God’s goodness because God is different from created things in virtue of being transcendent, perfect, and infinite. But we do have partial knowledge about God’s goodness that captures what God is like to some extent because God has revealed himself to us both generally (in creation) and specially (in history).

This appeal to divine transcendence on the one hand and divine revelation on the other makes it reasonable to take a theological approach somewhere in the middle on the spectrum between absolutely cataphatic theology (affirming our ability to have knowledge of God’s positive attributes—such as goodness) and absolutely apophatic theology (denying our ability to know anything positive about God but instead at best affirming our ability to know what God is *not*—such as that God is not evil).

So human knowledge of God is both incomplete and imperfect. But it is possible to know something about God and to know God to some extent nonetheless.

**Experiential Knowledge of God**

Being aware of God through direct personal acquaintance with God requires *experiencing* God. In general, for any existing concrete thing X, experiencing X as a basis for experiential knowledge of X yields at best only partial experiential knowledge of X. The full nature of any X always outstrips our finite human ability to know X experientially. This principle is true of our knowledge of physical objects and sentient beings in general (including other human persons).[[2]](#footnote-2) It even applies to our knowledge of *ourselves*. So, the fact that we don’t (and can’t) know God completely on the basis of experiences of God is not a fact unique to our knowledge of *God*.

Moreover, our experience of any existing concrete thing X is always richer in content than our thoughts about that experience. Conceptualization of experience always involves some degree of abstraction from the full specificity of the experience. But that’s the cognitive price we pay for being able to think—and talk—about the existing concrete things we experience. There is just always too much content in the experience for it to be practically possible to encapsulate all of it in a thought about it.

It follows that, for any experience we have, there will always be something unconceptualized and so unarticulated about it. Even empirical scientists (natural and social) who specialize in the study of a type of existing concrete thing and have become experts in the study of that type of thing are never capable of capturing the fullness of that type of thing in their theories about it. If this principle is true, then how much more it is also the case with theologians who study God—even theologians who have had a long, deep, and intimate personal relationship with God.

So, there are inherent limits to what we can say about experiencing God. Thus, there are limits to what we can say about knowing (and knowing about) God on the basis of experiencing God. But in spite of these limits, some things can be said.

We can think of experiences of God both in terms of the subjective phenomenological content of the human persons who consider themselves to have experienced God and also in terms of the causal relation between the human persons and God as the object of their experience. That is, we can focus on religious experiences as they appear to the people having them—whether or not they are veridical. And we can study them as veridical—as real connections with divine reality. I will be assuming here without argument that many religious experiences fall into the latter category.

Experiences of God come in different kinds. At the most general level, we can distinguish between ordinary and extraordinary experiences of God. Ordinary experiences of God occur relatively frequently but are also relatively subtle. Extraordinary experiences of God happen relatively rarely and are relatively pronounced. Mystical experiences of God tend to be classified as extraordinary.

**Mystical Experience of God**

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James discusses ordinary and extraordinary experiences of God. He bases his characterizations of these experiences on a number of diverse first-hand personal accounts of experiences of God. On the basis of James’s study of personal accounts of *mystical* experiences, he formulated a handful of “marks” he considered all mystical experiences to have in common: (1) Ineffability, (2) Knowability[[3]](#footnote-3), (3) Transiency, and (4) Passivity.[[4]](#footnote-4)

James says mystical states of consciousness are ineffable because people who have them report not being able to express them adequately in words. But in spite of that, these same people also say their mystical states provide them with knowledge—authoritative insights into some significant aspect of reality. Furthermore, these experiences are transient—they cannot be sustained for long. Finally, though mystics may actively do certain types of things to facilitate a mystical episode, the experience itself seems to them to come from a source other than their own will; they feel themselves to be passive recipients rather than active constructors of it.

Whether and how a person experiences God depends both on God and the person. Since God is a personal being, whether a human person actually experiences God (rather than merely seeming to experience God) depends on whether God chooses to manifest himself to that person. And whether the human person discerns that manifestation of God depends on how open that person is to the manifestation and also how attentive they are to it. Moreover, whether the human interprets God’s manifestation as a manifestation of *God* depends on the content of their conception of God and the extent to which they are willing to apply that conception to what they are experiencing.

Mystical experiences (of God) are often divided into two categories: numinous and non-numinous. The word “numinous” comes from “numen,” meaning divine or spirit. Numinous experiences are dualistic in nature and non-numinous experiences are monistic. Mystics from both dualistic and monistic religious traditions have had experiences of the latter sort (see below).

The concept of a numinous experience was formulated by Rudolph Otto in his classic work *The Idea of the Holy*.[[5]](#footnote-5) According to Otto, a numinous experience is a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (a fearful and fascinating mystery). It is a *mysterium* because it is an experience of a reality that is “Wholly Other.” It is a mysterium *tremendum* because the human having the experience feels awe, wonder, and even dread. This human response is due to one’s having a sense of creaturely insignificance and unworthiness in the face of the majestic power of the Other Presence. But the mysterium is also *fascinans* because in spite of the sense of unapproachability one has, one also feels a strong attraction to what seems like overwhelming Goodness and even Love.

I will consider all mystical experiences in which God appears to one as a reality ontologically distinct from oneself as numinous experiences in a broad sense—even if they do not have all the special features Otto attributes to numinous experiences in his narrower sense.

Non-numinous experiences have a unitive character. People who have them report a sense of unity or oneness with nature, the universe, the Divine, or God. From the perspective of those who have non-numinous experiences, their identity as a separate and distinct self tends to weaken—sometimes to the point of vanishing altogether. That description conveys an aspect of the *subjective content* of a non-numinous mystical experience.

Mystics in the impersonalistic/monistic traditions interpret non-numinous experiences epistemologically as revelatory of their true nature as ontologically one with ultimate reality (in whatever way they characterize it). They view mystical experiences of this sort as primarily a means of enlightenment about the true nature of reality. And in many monistic religious traditions, this enlightenment is the primary means of salvation or liberation.

Mystics in the personalistic/dualistic traditions interpret non-numinous experiences epistemologically as revelatory of their becoming more like God in character and closer to God in love while maintaining their ontological distinctness from God as a separate personal being. They view mystical experiences of this sort primarily as a means of deepening their intimate loving communion with God. And in many dualistic religious traditions, this growing personal union is what salvation consists in.

**Mystical Experience of God and Spiritual Growth**

Many mystics report growth or development in their consciousness of God over time.

In her influential work *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*,[[6]](#footnote-6) Evelyn Underhill characterizes the mystic way or path in terms of a series of stages with different features: (1) Awakening, (2) Purification, (3) Illumination, (4) The Dark Night of the Soul, and (5) Union. I will describe each of these stages in terms of how they tend to be characterized in personalistic religious traditions such as Christianity.

The Awakening (or Conversion) Stage is the transition from an ordinary human life to a life of openness to a greater unseen divine reality. The Awakening label implies that one’s former state was like being asleep and so in a condition of being unaware of and inattentive to aspects of reality accessible only to someone who is fully awake. And the Conversion label implies that one’s previous existence was oriented away from these greater things so that one needed to turn in a different direction to see what one had missed up to that point and to live in a way that one had not yet experienced.

The Purification (or Purgative) Stage involves an ongoing process of moral and spiritual transformation characterizable most generally as transition from a relatively narrow, closed-in, self-centered mindset and life to a wider, more open, other-oriented attitude and practice. In short, one improves in such a way as to become more like God in being self-sacrificial and genuinely loving. It is a process of being purified, purged, or cleansed of one’s sinful dispositions and habits.

The Illumination Stage is characterized by increasing knowledge of God and truths about God and by a growing self-awareness and self-knowledge. Knowledge of God and knowledge of self tend to progress together in this stage. The more one knows of God’s nature and character as holy and righteous love, the more one sees oneself as morally deficient and dependent on God’s mercy and forgiveness. Many mystics report a greater sense of their sinfulness and unworthiness later in their mystical journey than earlier.

The Purification and Illumination Stages tend to work together in an ongoing cycle. Jesus’s beatitude “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8) expresses this interaction between the heart (the human volitional and affective center) and the mind (the human perceptual and intellectual faculty). The more one becomes like God, the more one is able to see God, and the more one sees God, the more one desires to be like him.

The 16th-century Spanish Catholic priest, mystic, and Carmelite friar San Juan de la Cruz (St. John of the Cross—1542-1591) is usually considered the foremost expert on The Dark Night of the Soul Stage.[[7]](#footnote-7) In his writings, he focuses on the purification stage as preparation for full union with God. He characterizes the initial experience of Christian mystics in terms of delight in God’s “consolations” as they engage in active attempts to purge themselves of sin and vice. But the illuminations they receive are eventually replaced by darkness, and the comforts they enjoy gradually give way to dryness and agitation. St. John says God’s withdrawal at this point is intended to enable the mystic to learn to love God for who he is rather than for the benefits he gives. In the dark night, God provides mystics an opportunity to mature in faith and grow in virtue. John thinks this stage of “passive purgation” in which God does hidden work in the sinful soul is like the childhood stage in which a mother lovingly weans her baby from her breast to solid food.

The Union Stage is the ultimate goal of the mystical path. At this point, the mystic has grown to such an extent in humility and virtue that intimate loving communion with God becomes a reality. It is hard to describe this stage, since even the mystics who report experiencing it find it hard to express what it is like. However, in general terms, it seems clear that the darkness and struggle of the mystical night have been replaced by the light and serenity of the mystical day. And though the mystic continues to deal with trials and temptations, they are more disposed to face them with confidence and equanimity.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Clearly, mystics’ personal growth is not a product of a few disconnected mystical experiences. It is rather a result of their commitment to a prolonged way of life consisting in a set of practices that facilitate their ongoing and deepening relationship with God. This way of life is often called the “Contemplative Life.”

**Mystical Practices**

One prominent practitioner in the Contemplative Life is St. Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582), a contemporary and mentor of St. John of the Cross. She was a Carmelite nun, foundress, and reformer. Examples of practices she engaged in to facilitate her experiences of God can be found in her autobiography[[9]](#footnote-9) and her classic work *The Interior Castle*.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In the former work, she uses a gardening metaphor to describe, explain, and illustrate a four-stage prayer practice intended to facilitate growth in virtue and intimacy with God. This practice is often referred to as St. Teresa’s “Four Waters of Prayer.” Those who engage in it do so in order to bring God pleasure and glory by partnering with him to water the garden of their soul in such a way that the plants of virtue God has put into it will not die but grow and produce fruit and good-smelling flowers.

During the four stages, the human gardener transitions gradually from working very laboriously to get a small amount of water to the garden (resulting in a correspondingly low degree of growth in virtue and intimacy with God) to not working at all, since God provides all the water necessary for abundant growth to occur.

In the first stage, the human draws water from a well one bucket at a time and carries it to the garden. The prayer method that corresponds to this part of the extended metaphor involves spending time in solitude with God thinking about one’s past life, regretting one’s sins, resolving to serve God, and meditating on the life of Christ. One must do all these things in such a way as to keep one’s senses “recollected” and undistracted by external events. And the “water” one tries to draw out as a result of this process is the water of one’s tears (though in the case of a dry “well,” “a tenderness and inward feeling of devotion”[[11]](#footnote-11)).

In the second stage, the human gardener collects more water with less labor by means of a device provided by the owner of the garden: a water wheel with buckets that is turned by a crank connected to a “windlass.” The water is carried to the garden by means of a trench. St. Teresa calls this the “Prayer of Quiet.” The mystic’s work is simply to “recollect the soul” by “gathering the faculties” (will, intellect, imagination, memory) in submission to God. As a result, the soul “comes into touch with the supernatural” and God “communicates” himself and his grace to it in such a way that the water of God’s “blessings and favors . . . makes the virtues grow incomparably more than they did in the previous state of prayer.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

In the third stage, the garden is watered by a stream or spring that goes directly to it. So, the Divine Gardener does all the work, and the human gardener is completely at rest. At this point, “the soil . . . retains more moisture and needs watering less often.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The “work” of the soul is simply to abandon itself to God and enjoy with passive humility the growth in virtue provided by the Lord. Teresa characterizes this stage as the soul’s union with God—a union in which the soul is fully aware of but not fully understanding what is happening to it. And the mystic’s contemplative efforts in the first stage have given way to an “infused” contemplation (begun in the second stage), which is entirely the work of God in the soul apart from the human’s will. Interestingly, Teresa says prayer at this stage can be practiced when one is actively going about one’s business or engaging in works of charity.[[14]](#footnote-14)

But at the fourth and last stage, the soul is aware but completely “dead to the world”[[15]](#footnote-15) and unable to understand or express what it is experiencing. The garden is being watered by heavy rain—blessings poured out by God. And the contribution of the mystic is simply to be caught up in a blissful or rapturous enjoyment of complete union with the Lord in which “two separate things become one.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Teresa admits she is at a loss for words to describe what this stage is like. But she says this “water” is “an incomparably better method than the rest.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Teresa thinks of this four-stage prayer process as being essential for growth in virtue and intimacy with God. She says these four methods of watering are the means by which “this garden is to be maintained and without which it will fail.”[[18]](#footnote-18) So from her standpoint, the mystical path or contemplative life requires preparation in the form of practices that facilitate trusting surrender and obedient receptivity to God. But she also insists that the results are entirely the work of God’s grace in spite of the mystic’s unworthiness.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**Examples of Mystical Experiences**

The mystical tradition is replete with examples of personal experiences. I’ll feature three prominent Christian philosophers in this section: Augustine, Aquinas, and Pascal.

Augustine (354-430 A.D.) tells a story that illustrates his desire for complete knowledge of God. He and his mother Monica were staying in a house in Ostia on the river Tiber “where, far removed from the crowds, after the exhaustion of a long journey, we were recovering our strength” for an upcoming voyage. He says they were having an intimate conversation about “what quality of life the eternal life of the saints will have.” They concluded that “the pleasure of the bodily senses . . . is seen by comparison with the life of eternity to be not even worth considering.” At this point, writes Augustine, “our minds were lifted up by an ardent affection towards eternal being itself . . . We moved up beyond (created things) to attain to the region of inexhaustible abundance . . . And while we talked and panted after it, we touched it in some small degree by a moment of total concentration of the heart. And we sighed and left behind us ‘the first fruits of the Spirit’ (Rom. 8:23) bound to that higher world, as we returned to the noise of our human speech.” [[20]](#footnote-20) Augustine cherished this experience of temporary union with God in loving fellowship with his mother.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 A.D.) believed the highest goal of human life was to experience a direct vision of God[[21]](#footnote-21). This perception of God is known as the “Beatific Vision.” The Beatific Vision of God doesn’t consist in merely “looking at” God. It’s more like gazing into the eyes of one’s lover. It’s a personal and intimate direct encounter with God made possible by the purity of one’s heart and by God’s self-disclosure. So, it’s like seeing a man (or woman)—and seeing him to some extent for who he really is—as opposed to merely hearing about him or merely seeing his body. Aquinas thought a person could have this experience of God only after death.

But shortly before he died, while he was celebrating mass in 1273 on the Feast of St. Nicholas, Thomas received a revelation from God that affected him so profoundly that he decided to stop writing. He told his friend and secretary Reginald that all of his writings were “like straw” compared to what God had revealed to him.[[22]](#footnote-22) Though this revelation may not have been the Beatific Vision itself, it was apparently an encounter with God that Thomas treasured so much that he was willing to consider his life’s theological work much less valuable in comparison.

The mathematician, physicist, inventor, philosopher, and theologian Blaise Pascal (1623-1662 A.D.) had a profound experience of God for two hours one night in November of 1654. This experience has come to be known as Pascal’s “Night of Fire,” since he starts his account of it by simply writing, “FIRE.” Among the things he wrote in his record of the encounter are two quotations of Jesus from the Gospel of John: “The world has not known you, but I have known you” (John 17:25) and “This is eternal life, that they know you, the one true God, and the one that you sent, Jesus Christ” (John 17:3). Pascal considered his meeting with God to have involved *knowing* God and he characterized his knowing God to be *eternal life*. It’s also clear that he treasured this experience deeply, since he sewed the document containing his reflections about it (now known as “Pascal’s Memorial”[[23]](#footnote-23)) into his jacket, so that he would always have it with him—close to his heart.

It’s worth pointing out that though these three people were intellectuals who prized the life of the mind highly, each of them nonetheless valued knowing God even more. What they found in their academic pursuits was not enough to satisfy them. They weren’t content with anything less than a personal encounter with God.

**Mystical Experience and the Active Life**

Mystics are often criticized for privileging their personal experiences of the divine over the authority of the sacred scriptures of their religious tradition, valuing their individual quest for God more than their participation in a religious community, and/or meeting their own spiritual needs at the expense of time spent in active service to the church and the world. Consequently, they are sometimes charged with heresy, extreme individualism, and/or passive quietism.

But these complaints are not always warranted. St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas were both committed to the Scriptures, the Church, and a life of active service. And St. Teresa submitted herself to the authority of her superiors, founded a number of convents, and worked to reform her religious order.

These three examples show that the contemplative life and the active life are not necessarily mutually exclusive. On the contrary, some mystics see each of them as essential to a mystical life well lived. It is commonplace to point out that Jesus told the active, worried, and distracted Martha that her contemplative sister Mary had “chosen the better part” which is the only thing needed—to sit “at the Lord’s feet and listen to what he is saying” (Luke 10:38-42). But many mystics—like Augustine, Aquinas, and Teresa— found God calling them in the midst of their contemplation to an active life of service.

Other examples include Jesus, St. Paul, St. Dominic, St. Francis, St. Joan of Arc, St. Ignatius of Loyola, John Woolman, and Harriet Tubman, to name just a few. All of these people are remembered for both their mystical experiences of God and their contribution to human welfare.

Many readers may find it surprising that Harriet Tubman (1821-1913), the African-American woman who, as a freed slave, was one of the most successful “conductors” of the Underground Railway, was also a Christian mystic. She reported having had visions and divine guidance that empowered and directed her as she helped black slaves find their way to freedom. Her mystical experiences were directly tied to her efforts to bring about justice for others who had suffered injustice.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, we looked at mystical experiences as a type of religious experience. We considered how philosophers of religion who engage in religious epistemology theorize about the nature and limits of knowledge about and knowledge of God. And we focused in particular on experiential knowledge of God. Mystical experiences of God can yield a special type of such knowledge, and there are different types of mystical experiences. Many mystics throughout history have regarded their mystical experiences as episodes in a mystical way of life devoted to growth in likeness to and intimacy with God. And they have employed various practices designed to prepare them for these experiences and for the moral and spiritual growth that is both a part and a product of them. Many prominent figures in the Christian tradition (and in other religious traditions) have led mystical, contemplative lives. And a number of these people made important active contributions to human flourishing on the basis of their mystical encounters with God.

**For Further Reading**

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1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Random House, 1902). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Kelly James Clark, “Rocks, Persons, and God,” accessed April 26, 2021, https://www.academia.edu/6761967/Rocks\_persons\_and\_gods. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. James uses the label ‘noetic quality’ for this criterion. ‘Noetic’ means *having to do with the mind or intellect*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. James, *Varieties*, 371-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Otto, Rudolf, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, (Andesite Press, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Underhill, Evelyn, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Saint John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Image, 1959). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Not all partakers of the contemplative life report reaching the union stage. Some, such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta, seem to have spent much of their life in the Dark Night stage. See *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta* (New York: Image, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of St. Teresa by Herself*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin Books, 1957). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Mirabai Starr (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Teresa, *Life*, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Teresa, *Life*, 98-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Teresa, *Life*, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Teresa *Life*, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Teresa, *Life*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Teresa *Life*, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Teresa, *Life*, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Teresa, *Life*, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Teresa, *Life*, 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 170-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Summa Theologiae*, Supplement to the Third Part, Question 92, Article 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Herbert J. Thurston, S.J., and Donald Attwater, *Butler’s Lives of the Saints,* Complete Edition (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1990), 511. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 309-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet Tubman, the Moses of Her People* (SMK Books, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)