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The Nature of Mystical Experience from Various Philosophical Perspectives

Abstract: Along with the cultural interest in spirituality and mysticism in their various dimensions and meanings, which has been growing unabated for decades, there is a need for in-depth philosophical and theological reflection on the commonly referred to as mystical experience – an experiential dimension of religious life. In search of a theoretical elaboration of the phenomenon of human mystical life, this paper analyses the views of five Polish philosophers: Mieczysław Gogacz, Piotr Moskal, Jan A. Kłoczowski, Stanisław Judycki and Leszek Kołakowski. Their publications sought to answer questions about the nature of mystical experience and its ontic and epistemic conditions and characteristic structural elements. Particular attention was also paid to the context of religious life in which this kind of experience usually occurs, as well as to the fundamental concepts of mysticism as both practice and doctrine.

Keywords: mysticism, mystical experience, Mieczysław Gogacz, Piotr Moskal, Jan Andrzej Kłoczowski, Stanisław Judycki, Leszek Kołakowski

There are some diagnoses of contemporary cultural phenomena that, despite the passage of years, never become outdated, which can attest to their extraordinary accuracy. One of these came from under the pen of Professor Mieczysław Gogacz, who died in September 2022.

Considering the pace of transformations taking place in the contemporary world, his diagnosis was formulated quite a long time ago – almost 50 years – in a discussion entitled “O istocie i wartościach doświadczenia mistycznego [On the essence and values of mystical

experience]” published in 1977 in the journal *Życie i Myśl*.¹ In this debate, Professor Gogacz’s contribution bore the telling title: “Zainteresowanie mistyką jest wyrazem zainteresowania problemem Boga [Interest in mysticism is an expression of interest in the question of God]” (Gogacz 1977)² and offered interesting observations about the contemporary fascination with mystical experience, a phenomenon that the author calls the “renaissance of the longing for God.” According to Gogacz, this longing demands some kind of fulfilment, a specific plan and intention to move towards the Absolute (Gogacz 1985, 94).

It is precisely in the contemporary manner of this spiritual “move” towards God that the author sees a very disturbing feature, namely that the spiritual aspirations of contemporary man bear the stamp of an extremely deep individualism, which is expressed, among other things, as a “rather egoistic curiosity” about meeting and experiencing the Transcendent. A consequence of this attitude is the practice of an ever-increasing use of various ascetic techniques to achieve mystical fulfilment. This is not to diminish the value of ascetic effort, to which the author attributes considerable importance at the psychological level in maintaining mental hygiene, balance and inner integrity, and the ability to concentrate (cf. Gogacz 1985, 98), but rather it is a question of seeing in the individual ascetic effort the only way to forcefully and arbitrarily intrude into the sphere of divinity.

Meanwhile, according to the author, authentic mysticism in its fundamental dimension is realized in respect for the mutual will of the meeting of God and man. Hence, it always happens in the context of a mutual “gift of presence,” of man towards God and God towards man.

This personalistic perspective from which mysticism must be seen, for its part, demands adequate justification in the form

¹ The texts published in this issue are a transcript of a panel discussion that was held on 21 November 1976 as part of the XXII Symposium of the Circle for the Study of the Thought of Father Teilhard de Chardin at the editorial office of *Życie i Myśl*.

² This text was later reprinted in Gogacz 1985, 94–103.

of an adequate theory that establishes some boundary conditions for the mystical encounter. Hence, the renaissance of mysticism requires urgent terminological clarification and analytical studies that aim to explore the authentic essence of mystical experience, which is becoming available to the general public through various types of mystical literature.

It seems a matter of urgency, as Leszek Kołakowski notes, because we often observe an overuse of the term “mystical”: “The words ‘mystical’ and ‘mysticism’ are widely used for various unconnected purposes. Some of them we may safely discard; we do not need to bother about the vaguely disparaging or downright sloppy ways the word ‘mystical’ is frequently used in order to say that something is incomprehensible or mysterious or bizarre or absurd or simply religious. Still, even a more precise sense is intended, it has no commonly accepted limits, and in this it is not unlike all other religious and philosophical terms” (Kołakowski 1982, 98; 1988, 103).

This opinion seems to be supported by Stanisław Judycki, who observed in one of his articles: “The question of the objectivity of mystical states, understood as the experience of the presence of God, is often dismissed with a ‘sigh,’ implying that everything in this area is so subjective, individual, unverifiable, subject to auto-suggestion, projection of one’s own views and desires, error, illusion or even hallucination” (Judycki 2018, 11).

The aim of this article, therefore, is to present selected mystical theories developed by contemporary Polish philosophers who undertook to explore this issue: Mieczysław Gogacz, Piotr Moskal, Jan Andrzej Kłoczowski, Stanisław Judycki and Leszek Kołakowski. In reflecting on their texts, we will focus above all on the philosophical analysis of the nature of mystical experience and the understanding of mysticism itself.

1. Mieczysław Gogacz³

Mieczysław Gogacz, as he himself confesses in the introduction to his book *Filozoficzne aspekty mistyki* [*Philosophical Aspects of Mysticism*], describes his reflections as a “philosophical interpretation of mystical experience” (Gogacz 1985, 9; see Andrzejuk 2010) and as such they set out a “metaphysical and Thomistic line of solutions” (Gogacz 1985, 7; see Andrzejuk 2021). Although the author is a philosopher, due to the specificity of the issue, he is not unfamiliar with analyses from the field of theology, on which he draws much of his inspiration.⁴

1.1. The Concept of Mystical Experience and Mysticism

As part of his interpretation of mystical experience, Gogacz establishes its definition at the outset, which reads as follows: “a mystical experience is a sudden, not induced by man, conscious and immediate experience of God, in whose presence we believe, and who now makes himself directly perceptible to our spiritual cognitive abilities” (Gogacz 1985, 12; see Płotka 2019). A derivative of the concept of mystical experience thus defined is the understanding of mysticism (*mistyka*), which has mystical experience as its object, constituting its *sui generis* theoretical elaboration. Mysticism, being “theological knowledge of the conscious and direct experience of the presence of God taking place in man. It is an act of a sudden awareness in the human being that the intellect directly experiences the presence of God” (Gogacz 1985, 12), “belongs to the theoretical

³ Mieczysław Gogacz (1926–2022), philosopher, representative of Thomism. Initially affiliated with the Catholic University of Lublin, later with the Academy of Catholic Theology, where he headed the Department of the History of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, and with the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, where he worked at the Department of the History of Philosophy (see Andrzejuk 2011). The main source to get to know Gogacz’s views on the nature of mystical experience is Gogacz 1985. In fact, this book is in a sense a collection of texts already published. It contains articles on mysticism, of which the following seem particularly important for our study: Gogacz 1959, 1976, 1979.

⁴ M. Gogacz seems to be influenced by Wincenty Granat in his analyses of mystical experience; cf. Gogacz 1985, 45–48. See also Granat 1962, 120–50.

sciences, as a result of theology and philosophy or as a philosophical explanation of a theological problem” (Gogacz 1985, 42). In opposition to mysticism as an encounter (*mistyka*), Gogacz situates the concept of mysticism, or rather, pseudo-mysticism as focus on asceticism or mere knowledge of mystical states (*mistycyzm*; Gogacz 1985, 36). Pseudo-mysticism in this context would be a kind of fixation on the means in the form of ascetic techniques or mystical theory itself, instead of the striving for a mystical encounter with God and holiness of life.

1.2. The Object and Nature of Mystical Knowledge

Regarding the very nature of mystical experience, Gogacz observes that the mystic recognizes the existence of God in it, yet never forms any concept of His essence (cf. Gogacz 1985, 14). In this context, the author recalls the famous statement of Aquinas, who described the mystical cognition of God as “cognition as if experimental” (*cognitio quasi experimentalis Dei*).⁵ Thus, mystical experience is a rather specific cognition, for it provides knowledge in the “form of a non-conceptual sensation of the existence of God” (Gogacz 1985, 57). Gogacz emphasizes that it is a direct experience, i.e. not mediated by images or any discursive reasoning.

This experience of God’s presence, which is characteristic of the mystical experience, is usually combined with an experience of love of extraordinary intensity and occurs completely independently of the human will in a state of total passivity of the spiritual faculties.

Explaining the nature of this experience, the philosopher observes that it is “a direct experience of the very existence of God present in man by the passive intellect” (Gogacz 1985, 15). Thus, he interprets it in the spirit of Aristotelian and Thomistic anthropology as the work of the passive intellect, whose role he defines as follows: “The existence of being is grasped firsthand and directly by the passive intellect on the occasion of the active intellect’s acquisition of impressions, triggered by the presence of things. In

⁵ *In Sent.* 14, 2, 2, 3, after Gogacz 1985, 14.

the case of the experience of God's existence, the active intellect does not fulfil its functions because it has no material object before it. God, therefore, must enable the passive intellect to directly apprehend his existence. This "causing" is supernatural and uncovers the reason for cognition. The very experience of God's existence is an activity that falls within the nature of man" (Gogacz 1985, 41). In other words: "mystical experience is the human cognition of God as existence, a cognition brought about by God through His making Himself available to the human intellect directly, without reasoning or concepts, suddenly and momentarily, and that the mystic knows that he is experiencing God" (Gogacz 1985, 54).

1.3. The Religious Context of Mystical Experience

The author points out that mystical experience takes place in the lives of deeply religious people and is never "a mood, an emotion, a mental disintegration. It is an act of a sudden awareness in man that the intellect is directly experiencing the presence of God, that God with whom it has been in contact through an act of faith" (Gogacz 1985, 15). This religious contextuality of the mystical experience conditions its legibility and authenticity, for, as the author notes: "Difficulties arise when we isolate mystical experience from the totality of human experiences, from the culture in which these experiences are expressed, from theology and philosophy. A separate, unconnected mystical experience then becomes incomprehensible to us. It cannot be verified, evaluated. It can only be irrationally recognized or rejected" (Gogacz 1985, 18).

Thus, differences in the understanding of mystical experience and even interpretative difficulties arise, among other things, from the fact that mystical experiences are isolated from the wholeness of human experiences, from their cultural conditions and from the philosophical and theological interpretation given to them *ex post* by the mystics themselves. Deprived of its natural context in which it occurs, mystical experience becomes illegible and extremely difficult to understand. Consequently, in order to avoid this difficulty, the author frames mystical experience in the category

of the relationship that occurs between man and God (Gogacz 1985, 17–29).

1.4. The Relational and Community-Building Nature of Mysticism

Relationality constitutes Gogacz's highly original contribution to the understanding of mystical experience. As a consequence of this approach, the understanding of mystical experiences becomes dependent on a particular conception of God and a particular conception of man. For mystics describe their experiences by referring to a particular understanding of God and a particular understanding of man.⁶ Thus, the theory of God and anthropology provide interpretative categories for mysticism, both at the level of mystical literature and its philosophical and theological elaboration. The differences found in the theory of God and the theory of man constitute an important basis for the deepest divergences in the understanding of the mystical experience itself, both among mystics themselves and among theorists of mysticism.⁷ Such an approach, according to Gogacz, makes it feasible to correct or eliminate many opinions about mysticism and many theories of mystical experience. Accordingly, the author recognizes the possibility of an authentic mystical experience only: "when God is conceived as a Person with a self-contained existence, and man is treated as an independent entity, a subject with properties and relations, self-organized internally, under the influence of the external intentional causes when God created

⁶ "In explaining what mystical experience is, therefore, we must establish in the testimony of mystics their apprehension of God and also their apprehension of man. On these apprehensions depends the description of the relationship that is the mystical experience" (Gogacz 1985, 22). Mystics speak of their experiences "in a concrete language, in terminology whose senses relate to a particular conception of God and conception of man. Theorists of mysticism take up and consider these concepts in order to establish from them what the mystics have experienced" (Gogacz 1985, 30).

⁷ "The mystic, therefore, in describing his experience, also reveals how he understands God and how he understands man. It is to this formula, to the description of mystical experience already expressed and fixed in culture, that the researchers of these phenomena, specialists, therefore, in the concept of God and in the concept of man, have access" (Gogacz 1985, 18).

the existence that initiates it. This existence actualizes the whole inner content of man, his rational soul and his body, all that makes man a person” (Gogacz 1985, 30).

The concepts of God and man thus defined are regarded by the author as the essential *conditio sine qua non* of mystical experience. It should be added that this is a crucial, but not exclusive condition, since the possibility of the mystical life – in Gogacz’s opinion – must presuppose the existence of a kind of “intermediary link,” capable of filling or to some extent bridging the ontic gap that exists between God and man. This “Mediator” conditioning the presence of God in man is the person of Jesus Christ, the God-Man, who communicates to us the inner life of God adapted to human measure (cf. Gogacz 1985, 26).

It is in this perspective that the “gift of presence” mentioned above must be seen. It is only in the context of God’s personal life and man’s personal existence that the “gift of presence” acquires its full meaning. The author emphasizes that: “There is no mystical encounter with God when He Himself does not come to us. There is no presence when two people do not meet. No technique of meditation will help. In Christian mysticism this is how it is understood: it is God who makes Himself present in us. We cannot enter the Divine realm by ourselves, not only because it is an entirely different realm, but because when God, when invited, does not come, there will be no encounter” (Gogacz 1985, 94–95).

Alongside the relational dimension of the conception of mysticism proposed by Gogacz, it is this deeply personalistic dimension, expressed in the category of the benevolent, mutual and conscious sharing of personal existence, that constitutes the peculiar originality of his conception. On a theological level, this “gift of presence” can be described as grace.

“The gift of presence,” in addition to its personal rooting, also has a community-forming character. “Mysticism by its very nature,” the author notes, “opens up towards a community of some kind. After all, it is an encounter with the person of God. Of course, it is initiated by God, and I must be open to this encounter. I cannot accept it, because then there is no encounter. Mysticism, then, is an entrance into some community, into a close relationship between

God and man.” Consequently, the mystic is not meant to be a solitary ascetic; while experiencing mystical communion with God, he should also be open to communion with other people. It seems that this constitutes one of the criteria of the authenticity of mysticism. This is clearly visible in the lives of many Christian mystics recognized by the community of the Church, regardless of the time and space in which they lived. It is this communion with God and with other people that can colloquially be called the holiness of life. This brings us to the essential condition and at the same time the ultimate verifier of authentic mysticism – as Gogacz expressed it – “there can be holiness without mysticism, but there cannot be mysticism without holiness” (Gogacz 1985, 35).⁸ Holiness, therefore, or a kind of moral perfection, is the ultimate test of the authenticity of the spiritual life of the mystic.

2. Piotr Moskal⁹

Piotr Moskal’s reflections on the nature of mystical experience are in certain respects comparable to those discussed above. Both Gogacz and Moskal consider the views of St. Thomas Aquinas as an important point of reference; we may therefore consider their views on the nature of mystical experience as Thomistic.

⁸ “There can be holiness without mysticism; there is practically no mysticism without holiness. Mysticism without holiness is false mysticism, a man’s stopping at the means leading to God. At best, it is knowledge of mysticism” (Gogacz 1985, 42–43).

⁹ Piotr Moskal, born 1955, philosopher with specialization in the philosophy of God and religion, philosophy of history, affiliated with the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, where he was head of the Department of Philosophy of Religion at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Catholic University of Lublin until his retirement (cf. Moskal 2023). An essential source for learning about P. Moskal’s views on the nature of mystical experience are the following publications: Moskal 1999; 2006a; 2006b; 2006c; 2008, 11–29, 129–39.

2.1. The Concept of Mysticism and Its Object

Discussing the question of the essence of mysticism, Moskal notes that the contemporary dominant understanding of mysticism is that which defines it as a peculiar state of mind, as a form of consciousness transcending ordinary experience (cf. Moskal 2006b, 129). From philosophical point of view, the problem of determining the object of mystical experience and the related issue of the definition of mysticism seem to be difficult to solve. The fundamental difficulty lies, among other things, in the fact that we do not have direct access to the states of consciousness of mystics, we only have accounts of their experiences (cf. Moskal 2006b, 130).

Moskal treats Christian mysticism as “the principal analogue of various kinds of mysticism” (Moskal 2006b, 130). In turn, he considers the bond of man’s love with God, that is, what is most mysterious and intimate in it, to be the essential feature of authentically Christian mysticism (cf. Moskal 2006b, 133). Hence, he considers mysticism to be “religion *per excellentiam* – a dynamic, person-to-person relationship between man and God” (Moskal 2006b, 133). Thus, like Gogacz, we are dealing here with the relational nature of mysticism, which is an important interpretative category of it.

2.2. Subjective and Objective Reasons of Mystical Relation

Considering the mystical relation from a philosophical point of view, Moskal distinguishes in it both subjective and objective reasons. He explains them as follows: “The subjective reason is the metaphysically understood nature of man – that he is a contingent, potentialized, personal being, open to God as a personal good without boundaries. The objective reason is the existence of a personal God on whom man depends for existence – a God who is the causal, exemplary and purposive cause of contingent being” (Moskal 2006b, 133). The establishment of a mystical relationship between man and God, understood in this way, exceeds the possibilities of human nature, requiring entirely the initiative of God.

2.3. The Nature of Mystical Knowledge

Since the essence of mysticism – according to Moskal – consists of experiencing certain mental states (cf. Moskal 2006b, 130), and, on the other hand, “God, His action, presence and union with Him are not the object of experience” (Moskal 2006b, 130),¹⁰ hence the only object of mystical experience – in Moskal’s opinion – can be the subject himself, “who experiences himself as knowing and loving God,” it can also be the subjective “certainty of union with God or God’s presence,” as well as “God as the correlate of man’s intentional acts” and “certain subjective sensations interpreted as manifestations of God’s work” (Moskal 2006b, 133). It seems that, as far as the subject of mystical experience is concerned, the views of this author diverge from those of Gogacz, but the divergence is only apparent, for both are faithful to Aquinas’s fundamental theses, especially as far as the impossibility of knowing the essence of God, and therefore the impossibility of experiencing it, is concerned. The apparent divergence seems to be a semantic issue more than a substantive one, for both are related to the mystical perception of the presence and work of God in the human soul, and these are experienced in the subjective consciousness of man. Moskal seems to dispel interpretive doubts when, in his article *Experiencing God?*, defining mystical experience as a sudden awareness of God’s presence in the soul, he notes: “This awareness is not initiated by man, but is something accepted by man (a moment of passivity), it appears suddenly, it is discourseless, not mediated by images or imagination and non-conceptual, and it is characterized whilst its duration by certainty (unquestionability), although, after the end of this experience, anxiety may arise as to the possibility of illusion. [...] Note, however, that in the case in question we are dealing with the presence of God as a given of consciousness. It is not a direct cognition of God as a real concrete, and therefore there is a problem of verification of the mystical experience so understood” (Moskal 1999, 222–23).

¹⁰ “As far as mystical experience is concerned, its object is neither God nor grace or union with God” (Moskal 2006b, 133).

The issue of the object of mystical experience is elaborated in more detail by Moskal in his book *Filozofia Boga i epistemologia przekonań teistycznych* [*The Philosophy of God and the Epistemology of Theistic Convictions*] (Moskal 2008). Considering there the issue of religious experience, the author reflects on the problem of direct experience, i.e. experience which excludes the existence of intermediaries of cognition.¹¹ In this context, he adopts for the purposes of his considerations “the concept of experience as direct cognition of being” (Moskal 2008, 19).¹² Consequently, he distinguishes different types of religious experience, the first three of which we can consider as different forms of mystical experience. These include:

1. “Experiences of subjective states of consciousness, conviction and certainty as to the existence, presence and action of God or as to union with Him. In these experiences, God, God’s presence or union with Him is only the content of consciousness, it is something to which man nourishes certain cognitive states” (Moskal 2008, 20).
2. “Experiences of intellectual and cognitive states interpreted as God’s gift of understanding various matters” (Moskal 2008, 22).

¹¹ Moskal distinguishes three basic types of intermediaries of cognition: “1. *medium ex quo*, or system mediation or mediating syllogism. One has to know the premises or theory in order to be able to know and recognize the particular sentences functioning in the system or deduced from the sentences previously accepted; 2. *medium quod*, i.e. a non-transparent intermediary, a conventional, instrumental sign, which one has to understand beforehand, to know in order to be able to understand the signified sense (e.g. language, cultural symbols). The cognition of the sign is the rationale for the cognition of the signified sense; 3. *medium quo*, a transparent, natural, formal intermediary (concept) that does not arrest our cognitive attention. In spontaneous (i.e. unreflected) cognition, the concept is not what we cognize (*id quod cognoscitur*), but what we cognize through (*id quo cognoscitur*)” (Moskal 2008, 18).

¹² “It is about direct cognition in the sense of cognition that is non-discursive and not mediated by a non-transparent sign (*medium quod*), among other things by the symbol” (Moskal 2008, 19).

3. “Experiences of organic and affective states and sensations interpreted as manifestations or fruits of divine action” (Moskal 2008, 22).

In a concluding discussion of the various forms of religious experience, which includes mystical experience, we read: “None of the types of experience mentioned above is an experience of God. In none of the situations described or referred to is God the object of direct knowledge. How is God given in these experiences? He is given as a content of consciousness, as a cognitive content and as an intentional correlate of human acts” (Moskal 2008, 26). This inability to directly perceive God, from a philosophical point of view, two epistemological and metaphysical causes: “Firstly, due to the psychophysical nature of man, something connatural to the human intellect is the nature of corporeal things. God, on the other hand, is incorporeal. Secondly, God is *suum esse*, He is transcendent. Consequently, no created cognitive form, no *species creata*, can be a likeness of God representing him in the cognitive subject. No concept can constitute the *medium quo* of the view of God” (Moskal 2008, 26–27).

2.4. Affective Knowledge of God

It follows from the above that the problem of the object of mystical experience is not explained at the philosophical level because, as the author notes: “If religious experience is not direct cognition of God, and God nevertheless appears in the human intellect (and is given in religious experience as a cognitive/conscious content and as an intentional correlate of human acts), then he appears there not through direct cognition, but in some other way” (Moskal 2008, 27).

And this “other way” is the action of divine grace, the nature of which is explained by theology, reaching back to Revelation. It is here that the author strongly refers to the views of Aquinas, situating the theological interpretation of the mystical life in the context of Thomas’ doctrine of the affective cognition of God, which he also calls “cognition by connaturality, cognition by inclinations, cognition by love, cognition by union, cognition through experiencing divine things (*patiens divina*) or experimental cognition” (Moskal 2006a,

39). According to Moskal, this cognition takes place on two levels: on the level of man's natural inclinations towards God (deepest desires, search for happiness) and on the level of man's religious orientation towards God (love and connaturality with what is divine, expressed in cognition proper to the gift of wisdom, synthesis of cognition and love in contemplation and experiencing things of God; cf. Moskal 2006a, 42–46; 2008, 129).

Without doubt, a valuable contribution of Moskal's views to the theory of mystical experience is the clarification of the nature of its object by expressing it in terms of a particular state of consciousness. Another original idea of the author is to place the interpretation of mystical experience in the context of the Thomasian concept of affective cognition of God.

3. Jan Andrzej Kłoczowski¹³

Of the many different ways of researching mysticism, Jan Andrzej Kłoczowski chose the one based on determining the characteristics whose occurrence allows one to recognize a given phenomenon as a manifestation of mystical awareness (Kłoczowski 2001, 22).

3.1. The Diagnostic Features of Mystical Experience

In this way of researching mystical phenomena, his approach follows in the footsteps of predecessors such as the classic work by William

¹³ Jan Andrzej Kłoczowski OP (1937–2025), Dominican Friar, art historian, theologian, philosopher, publicist. Graduated in art history in Poznań, worked as an assistant in the Department of Art History at the Catholic University of Lublin. Head of the Department of Philosophy of Religion at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Cracow, and lecturer at the Dominican Fathers' College of Philosophy and Theology in Cracow. In 2014, he was awarded the title of Master of Sacred Theology – the highest Dominican academic title – by the General of the Order. Essential sources for learning about Kłoczowski's views on mysticism and mystical experience are the following publications: Kłoczowski 2001, 2003.

James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)¹⁴ or the no less classic book *Mysticism* by Evelyn Underhill.¹⁵ He explicitly calls these characteristics “the diagnostic features of mystical experience” (Kłoczowski 2001, 22) and lists four of them: the experience of radical passivity, the idea of the Whole, the so-called strong moments, and the total transformation of being (Cf. Kłoczowski 2001, 22–26). Their analysis is preceded by a rather comprehensive and insightful discussion – on a par with Louis Bouyer’s famous essay (1949, 1980) – of the most frequently used meanings of the words “mysticism” and “mystical” in history, with particular reference to the views of St Thomas Aquinas on the matter (Kłoczowski 2001, 8–16).

As far as the understanding of “diagnostic features” is concerned, they define – according to Kłoczowski – the most characteristic elements of mystical experience in a very broad sense. Their precise meaning usually depends on the religious context in which they are considered. The first of the mentioned characteristics – “the experience of radical passivity” (Kłoczowski 2001, 22–23) – involves, among other things, the mystic becoming aware that “what is most important takes place outside him and is independent of him.” Passivity is a very “crucial factor to distinguish mysticism from all forms of magical consciousness.”¹⁶ Kłoczowski also emphasizes the paradoxical peculiarity of passivity, which, as “a new activity, stimulated by divine light,” remains in its essence something extremely active. On the other hand, the “idea of the Whole” (cf. Kłoczowski 2001, 23–24) – as another diagnostic feature – communicates that mysticism becomes a matter of expanded consciousness, which “ceases to be only a consciousness

¹⁴ William James proposed four marks of mystical states of consciousness: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity. Cf. James 2001, 293–94.

¹⁵ E. Underhill proposes to supplement James’ marks with the following rules that she has developed: “Mysticism is about practice, not theory”; 2. “Mysticism is an entirely spiritual activity”; 3. “The goal and path of mysticism is love”; 4. “Mysticism involves a specific psychic experience”; 5. “True mysticism never seeks itself” (Underhill 2002, 82, 84, 85, 90, 92). See Kiwka 2018.

¹⁶ “By magic is commonly meant the actions of man who seeks to control and manipulate *sacrum* for his own ends” (Kłoczowski 2001, 23).

that is individual and confined within its own framework, while the self gains access to some universal consciousness” (Kłoczowski 2001, 23). In the theistic context, when experiencing God, the mystic experiences the painful contingency of the world in which he or she has come to live, while at the same time having an intuitive sense of the fullness of the encompassing reality. On the other hand, the so-called “strong moments” (cf. Kłoczowski 2001, 24–25), in which God reaches the deepest intimacy of the soul, are expressed in experiences that transcend the boundaries of ordinary life and are of two kinds: purely internal (spiritual) and external (psychosomatic). While we do not have direct access to the former (we learn about them from the testimony of mystics), psychosomatic phenomena (ecstasies, levitations, stigmata) are subject to external observation and can be the subject of research by, for instance, psychologists. The last diagnostic feature of mystical experience is the “total transformation of being” (cf. Kłoczowski 2001, 25–26). For mysticism expresses itself not only in a gradual transformation of consciousness, but also in a radical transformation of life, taking on the processual form of a “mystical path,” which, in turn, Kłoczowski divides according to the classical Christian tradition into three stages: purification, enlightenment and union (cf. Kłoczowski 2001, 29). It is this radical transformation of life that constitutes a reliable test of the authenticity of his experience of God and is what other authors define as holiness or moral perfection.

3.2. Mysticism and Religions

To the questions very often asked today about the unambiguity of the term “mysticism,” and about the existence of a so-called “common nucleus” of different mysticisms, after a careful analysis of the various positions, Kłoczowski answers: “it cannot be claimed that there is one mysticism hiding in each of the historical religious traditions, but it must be assumed that each of these traditions produces ‘its’ mysticism, although the structural similarities of the different mystical traditions are indisputable” (Kłoczowski 2001, 17).

On the question of the interrelation of mysticism-religion, Kłoczowski avoids extremes, recognizing that “an intermediate position seems most reasonable. Mysticism and religion are different realities – but there are religious people who are mystics, and there are mystics who are not religious people” (Kłoczowski 2001, 20).

3.3. Typology of Mysticism

From this perspective, the author attempts to systematize the types of mysticism, taking as a principle of division “the different varieties of the relationship between the mystic and the Reality to which the mystic aspires and with which he or she wishes to attain the unification” (Kłoczowski 2001, 20). He thus distinguishes three main types: ecstatic mysticism, instatic mysticism and dialogical mysticism (cf. Kłoczowski 2001, 20–22).¹⁷ The first of these, ecstatic mysticism, is characterized by the author as follows: “The main goal for the adept is to transcend the limitations of time and space in order to achieve union with the Cosmos (Nature, Whole). This is based on the understanding of the individual being as a part, separated from the Oneness, and at the same time on the feeling of an overwhelming need to achieve the original unity. One discovers the Cosmos as unity (all-is-one): “the mystic’s self is dissolved, as it were, in this Wholeness and annihilated in an individual being. Otherwise, this strand of mysticism is referred to as *pan-en-henism* (all-is-one; Kłoczowski 2001, 20–21).

By contrast, in instatic mysticism, essentially characteristic of monistic systems: “The external world is viewed [...] as non-existent or existing only as an apparent being (as *maja*, an illusion). What appears to man as the most real and leading further to true reality is the Self (*Soi, Selbst, Self*). This *Self* is not the self on a psychological level but has a deeper root. The path to union with absolute

¹⁷ This kind of division of types of mysticism is inspired by the reflections of Robert Ch. Zaehner, who in his famous work *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* in a similar way distinguishes between the types of mysticism: panenhenistic (*pan-en-hen-istic; all-in-one-ism*), pantheistic (*all-God-ism*) and Christian mystical experience. Cf. Zaehner 1969, 30.

reality leads deep within the human being: one has to travel a long path of initiation and inner transformation in order to learn to detach oneself from illusory externality and to know spiritually the deepest truth: the truth of one's identity with the divine. This is the path described by the early *Upanishads*, giving the formula for this union. It reads: *tat tvam asi*, "you are this," i.e. your *atman* spirit is identical with Brahman (Kłoczowski 2001, 21).

The third mentioned, dialogical mysticism, has as its natural context the personal experience of God. The author characterizes it as follows: "Such mysticism develops in the prophetic religions, because its fundamental experience is the discovery of a personal God who speaks to man and enters into a relationship with him, revealing himself to him. It is personalistic mysticism that discovers God as a Person and seeks union with Him through love, not by sinking into the ocean of the abyssal Divine. It is very important that union is achieved through love – with the awareness of the separate identity of man and God. The mystic experiences ecstasy, but it is not the result of the loss of his own identity; on the contrary: it flows from the experience of the mutual presence (Kłoczowski 2001, 22).

Kłoczowski's reflections on the nature of mystical experiences are not limited to the mystical paradigm of Christianity but attempt to encompass as many phenomena defined as mystical in contemporary culture as possible. This constitutes the undoubted value of his reflections and allows us to draw more broadly on the richness of the spiritual life of contemporary man.

4. Stanisław Judycki¹⁸

4.1. The Concept of Mystical Experience and Typology of Mysticism

Stanisław Judycki's considerations open with the classic definition of a mystical state, which he understands as "direct experience

¹⁸ Stanisław Judycki, born 1954, philosopher; his research interests include epistemology, philosophy of religion and history of modern philosophy; associated with the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, where he served as director of the Institute of Theoretical Philosophy and head of the Department of Theory

of the presence of God and certain aspects of His nature” (Judycki 2017, 1; see also Judycki 2014, 145). However, to make this definition a point of reference for the typology outlined in further analyses, he proposes a maximally inclusive definition: “direct contact with the divinity of the world, with spirits of various kinds, including the spirits of ancestors, with the entirety of the rational and living cosmos, etc.” (Judycki 2017, 1; cf. Judycki 2020a, 2:1070).

In sorting out the richness of the mystical tradition, Judycki established three sets of criteria. First, he distinguished between theistic and non-theistic mysticism, then he identified three areas to which mystical experience can apply: the mysticism of God, the mysticism of nature and the mysticism of the self; finally, he completed this framework with a further distinction between natural mysticism and supernatural mysticism (Judycki 2017, 2–3; see Judycki 2020b, 147). The possible relationships between these criteria provide the basis for identifying the following essential types of mysticism:

1. Theistic mysticism also known as the mysticism of God understood as “the direct experience of the most perfect being, that is, one from whom nothing higher and nothing more perfect can be thought” (Judycki 2017, 3). It is not only about an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good God, but also about God whose “perfection consists in the ability to participate in the imperfect, and that participation is direct” (Judycki 2017, 3), as expressed in all the radicality of the Christian truth of the Incarnation. According to Judycki, only God understood in this way “can be the object of direct experience that satisfies the deepest desires of human beings” (Judycki 2017, 3), at the same time constituting the criterion for the authenticity of all kinds of mysticism. Mysticism pertaining

of Cognition at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Catholic University of Lublin; since 2010 head of the Department of Metaphysics and Philosophy of Religion at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Gdańsk (Judycki 2012). Essential sources for learning about Judycki’s views on mystical experience are the following publications: Judycki 2010, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2018, 2020.

to God thus understood fully deserves to be called supernatural mysticism.

2. A non-theistic mysticism of nature that which arises from a “reverent awe” toward the cosmos and its grandeur, harmony and rationality on the one hand, and a kind of fear of nature as something indifferent or even malevolent to man and his most noble aspirations on the other (cf. Judycki 2017, 3–5). As such, non-theistic mysticism can transform, according to Judycki, into a form of mysticism of being, in which nature appears as one of the possibilities realized by what exists.
3. Theistic mysticism of the self also known as mysticism of encounter, where God reveals himself and meets with man within his “conscious interiority” (Judycki 2017, 6).
4. Non-theistic mysticism of the self, which may manifest either as spirit-contact mysticism or as annihilation mysticism, whose essence is founded in the abolition of suffering through the annihilation of one’s individuality in favor of an undefined divinity by entering into some kind of primordial oneness as the ultimate destiny of individual minds and the basis of the world (cf. Judycki 2017, 6–7).¹⁹

4.2. Mystical “Existentials” and Proto-Mystical Experiences

Judycki is convinced that both of the aforementioned “non-theistic mysticisms not only fail to meet the deepest desires of people, but above all, they do not take into account the human nature and its essential characteristics” (Judycki 2017, 11). And this nature, according to the Author, indicates its spiritual dimension in the functional or substantive sense, or in both senses simultaneously, as evidenced by many characteristics inherent in human beings (see

¹⁹ Among other types of mysticism, he mentions the following: speculative (ontic and theological) mysticism, ascending mysticism – descending mysticism, bridal mysticism, mysticism of suffering, female mysticism – male mysticism, great mysticism – small mysticism, unifying mysticism, and apophatic mysticism – cataphatic mysticism (cf. Judycki 2017, 7–8; f. also Judycki 2020a, 2:1072–84).

Judycki 2004). According to Judycki, these include those specific qualities that he called “existentials,” attributing to them a “mystical” meaning in the double sense of the word. On the one hand, they appear in consciousness as “vague” and “indistinct,” and on the other hand, they are the natural condition that opens man to the mystical experience of God’s presence and enables his understanding (cf. Judycki 2017, 12). Judycki includes the following phenomena in the group of “mystical existentials”: (1) the experience of the emptiness of the world’s horizon, (2) the experience of inner solitude, (3) the experience of outer solitude, (4) the experience of ignorance concerning the principles of the presence of objects, and (5) the experience of being predestined to egoism (cf. Judycki 2017, 12–19).²⁰ The experience of God would be tantamount, in this perspective, to satisfying fulfillment of each of the aforementioned “existentials” as areas of man’s nagging sense of finiteness (cf. Judycki 2017, 19). This specification of the anthropological conditions of mystical experiences is Judycki’s highly original contribution to modern theory of mysticism, alongside with his distinction of two types of “proto-mystical experiences”: (1) “the experience of beauty of the world with the conviction that this beauty was created by someone,” and the experience of the voice of conscience “with the conviction that there is an ultimate authority that holds us accountable for our deeds”; (2) the so-called “horizontal experiences of the presence of God,” to which Judycki includes: “the experience of loneliness and impending death; the experience that one is guided by God and that it is He who shapes our lives; the experience of terrible evil; the experience of great sorrow; the birth of a child; romantic love; shared joy; deep peace” (cf. Judycki 2014, 150–70; 2020a, 1086–87).

4.3. Critique of William James’s “Marks”

With regard to the classical approaches, which include four characteristics of mystical states listed by William James (cf. James 1902,

²⁰ A discussion of the meaning of each of the aforementioned existentials is presented in Judycki 2017, 13–19. Cf. also Judycki 2020a, 2:1109–22.

379–82; 2001, 293–94).²¹ Judycki is quite critical and identifies “significant flaws” in each of the characteristics distinguished by the American psychologist. Thus, against the “ineffability” of mystical states, he formulated the following accusation: “by means of words and what they denote one cannot express the uniqueness and richness of any experience” (Judycki 2017, 8–9), since “any kind of direct experience is ineffable with words and concepts” (Judycki 2018, 22). The “flaw” of the “noetic quality” of mystical states he recognized essentially in two aspects. First, he emphasized that “everything that appears in consciousness has a noetic quality, even illusions and hallucinations, as long as we judge them properly, and do not attribute to them erroneously the representation of extrasensory reality.” Secondly: “mystical experiences of God carry with them the components of presence and consolation, which [...] is far more important than this ‘noetic quality’” (Judycki 2017, 9). In turn, the “transiency” of mystical states, according to Judycki, can be easily dismissed with a counterargument that one may continuously experience the mystical presence of God in the majesty of nature or His guidance in human life (Judycki 2017, 9). On the other hand, the “passivity” of mystical states specified by James, Judycki finds most problematic for two main reasons: “first, because all experiences of the world are passive; nowhere do we find examples of creating what we experience.” Second, Judycki objects to further elaborating on the meaning of this passivity by insisting, as James did here, that it is a matter of being “grasped and held by a supreme power.” “God is unquestionably a power higher than us,” Judycki notes, “but James’ term fits more with demonic mysticism, since God, infinitely superior to us in all things, generally appears not as a force ‘grasping’ us, but either as a teacher or judge, or as a person filling our entire cognitive abilities with his good will. He does not ‘grasp’ us as a supreme power, because for Him we are not someone who could compete with in any way” (Judycki 2017, 9).

²¹ James proposed four marks of mystical experience: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity.

4.4. Metaphysical Visions of the World and Mysticism

Undoubtedly, an extremely valuable achievement in Judycki's reflection on the nature of mystical states is the determination of the relationship between metaphysical visions of the world and mysticism itself. He situates this relationship in the context of Christian mysticism of God, explaining its essence as follows: "metaphysical visions of the world, including any reasoning that proves the existence of God, categorized as natural theology or philosophical theology, would be 'empty' without direct experience of God, while mystical states would be 'blind' without speculative, metaphysical reasoning, without reflection, which is called natural or philosophical theology, on the existence and nature of God" (Judycki 2017, 10).²² This relationship of complementarity between a state and the theory that offers its clarification leads to the creation of what Judycki referred to as "a system of assertions operating in the background of mystical states." This system not only has an interpretative function in relation to the experience but additionally may verify its authenticity. Judycki notes, "When no theological or other reasons appear against any particular claim to be a direct experience of God, then it is permissible to assume that it was indeed an experience of God. In this case, the mystical state is independent of other sources of knowledge about the existence of God and His nature" (Judycki 2018, 11; see also Judycki 2020b, 147).

4.5. Objectivity of Mystical Experiences

Another extremely topical issue, namely the objectivity of mystical states and their historical and cultural contextualization, is explored by Judycki with regard to three assumptions: 1. the transhistoricity of the relationships between each person and God; 2. the processuality of mystical states; and 3. the axiological dimension of mysticism (the mystical states are never axiologically neutral; Judycki

²² "Experiences without concepts are 'blind,' and this means that we can understand what we experience only when we have proper concepts" (Judycki 2018, 24).

2018, 12–13; 2020a, 1084–108). By way of introduction, Judycki starts from the assumption that “drawing on an analogy between mystical states and sensual perception is indeed inaccurate” (Judycki 2018, 14), hence “justifications of objectivity pertaining to physical objects are unreasonably made a universal standard” (Judycki 2018, 14). For at least a part of mystical states are not sensory, but intuitive experience. Nevertheless, “it is not a matter of sensory intuition, nor of imaginative intuition, nor, of course, of pure semantic awareness, that is, of ‘pure’ knowledge of God, taken from a source other than the mere sense of His presence” (Judycki 2018, 16). According to Judycki, the experience of God’s presence is a “quasi-perception,” which makes “what the subject experiences, imposes itself on him, is something that grasps him, as it were, and has a stable character. [...] Experiences of the presence of God are most often very strong experiences, and this replaces the power of conviction that we have to deal with in the case of repeated sensory experiences” (Judycki 2018, 16). In addition, in order to strengthen the conviction of the objectivity of mystical states, Judycki refers to the so-called “congruence criterion,” which states that “if mystical states agree in some way with the tradition of natural theology, which speaks of God as a perfectly good being, if they agree with the religious tradition and its fundamental assertions about God, this constitutes confirmation of their objectivity” (Judycki 2018, 17). This objectivity is further reinforced by the existential consequences evident in the lives of mystics. These include “radical conversion, sanctity of life, a sense of certainty about one’s fate, lack of fear of death, kindness to other people” (Judycki 2018, 18).²³

²³ As an additional argument in favor of the objectivity of mystical experience, Judycki refers to the so-called “doxastic practices,” the theory of which was formulated in Alston 1991. Doxastic practices are socially sanctioned ways of creating and justifying beliefs, for instance, about God.

4.6. Immediacy and Intersubjective Accessibility of Mystical Experience

Certainly, the whole question of the essence of mystical experience can be reduced to so-called natural explanations, i.e. those that see their causes only in the inherent properties of the human organism. To supporters of such solutions, Judycki replies: “Even if we assume that in the future we would be able to observe precisely which areas of the brain become active when someone has experiences of God, we cannot conclude from this that the brain and nervous system are their causes, for in the same way one would have to say that when mathematicians [...] think about Pythagorean theorem, the complete explanation behind it can be what is currently going on in their brains” (Judycki 2018, 20–21). From the fact that our experiences are mediated in the nervous system, it does not follow that their object can only be reduced to the functioning of these structures. For Judycki insists that “it is not necessary that experiences [...] be mediated by any causal ‘chains’” (Judycki 2018, 21). In this perspective, mystical states of God appear as entirely direct: “direct both causally and epistemically. They are causally direct because no causal chains extending through space and time are needed to experience the presence of God. They are, on the other hand, epistemically direct in the sense that they are not derived from any kind of reasoning” (Judycki 2018, 21).

Mystical states described and in some way interpreted by those experiencing them in the form of accounts become intersubjectively accessible (Judycki 2018, 21; see also Judycki 2010, 30–31). The fact that mystical accounts exist means that the path leading to the experiences described therein is in some way already determined. It might seem, therefore, that it would be enough to apply a certain “spiritual procedure” to become a mystic. However, as Judycki notes, “in Christian mysticism there is indeed action on the part of the subject (*actio*), but ultimately the initiative always belongs to God: the subject, as a result of his or her actions, is ‘grasped’ by the object toward which he or she is moving (*passio*), and both the experience

of His presence and the certainty of that presence are given by God” (Judycki 2018, 22).²⁴

4.7. Universality of Mystical States

On the question of the universality of mystical states, Judycki distinguishes two types of such experiences, which in his opinion deserve to be called universal (cf. Judycki 2018, 24). One directed outward, called “extraverted experiences,” and the other type directed inward, “introverted experiences.” Extroverted experiences offer the perception of the unity of the world, which they interpret as “some kind of inner life of the world, or even as a consciousness that the world has as a whole.” Introverted experiences, on the other hand, have the goal of getting rid of all conscious content and achieving a state of so-called “pure consciousness.” However, Judycki strongly emphasizes that “experiences of the unity of the world and pure consciousness do not answer the question of man’s fundamental existential situation” (Judycki 2018, 25).

4.8. Critique of Constructivism

Are mystical states shaped or even induced before the particular cultural and religious area to which the mystic belongs? To what extent does the conceptual scheme operating in a particular religion determine the content of mystical states? To what extent are these experiences projections of the mystic’s own beliefs?

Seeking answers to the questions posed above, Judycki considers the hypothesis of a determining (or even inducing) influence of the cultural and religious context on the fact and content of mystical states. To accept such a hypothesis as true, according to Judycki, would undermine cases where such experiences appeared suddenly and in people who previously showed a negative attitude to God (cf. Judycki 2018, 26). Besides, he accentuates that

²⁴ “Ultimately in Christian mysticism it is not men who are the causes of God’s action, but He Himself who is the exclusive cause of all experience” (Judycki 2018, 22).

from the fact that “our sensory image of the world an important role is shaped by the concepts and beliefs at our disposal [...] one cannot infer that concepts and beliefs induce in us the experiences themselves, and that these experiences, their sensory content, are non-objective” (Judycki 2018, 26).

4.9. Criterion of the Veracity of Mystical States

Looking for some criterion of the veracity of mystical states, Judycki comes to the conviction that a “probabilistic criterion” suffices here, that is, a criterion of the congruence of mystical experience with other available elements of knowledge about God. “If mystical states agree with the theses about God established by philosophy (philosophical theology), if they agree with contents considered to be revealed, if they are confirmed by events treated as miraculous, then it can be concluded that these mystical states present God with certain characteristics. This does not mean, however, that mystical states reported by those belonging to other religions must be treated as false” (Judycki 2018, 27).²⁵ This is possible because Judycki believes that mystical states are “the experience of only a certain aspect of God, an aspect that complies with the conceptual scheme of a particular religion” (Judycki 2018, 27). “From this, however, it does not follow that these experiences are equivalent: some more adequately reflect the presence of God and fragments of His nature, while others do so only partially” (Judycki 2018, 27). The extent to which mystical states present in various religious systems reflect the nature of God, in Judycki’s view, can be evaluated from the point of view of the Christian philosophical and theological concept, and will consist “in the compatibility of the content of these other mystics with philosophical reasoning, in which God is the most perfect being, a self-conscious entity who created the world and is concerned with the ultimate good of human beings” (Judycki 2018, 28). This congruence criterion, according to Judycki, should be supplemented by a certain “axiological moment,” in which attention is paid to “how far God, experienced through the conceptual schemes belonging

²⁵ See also Judycki 2020a, 1046–47.

to other religions, guarantees the rectification of evil, suffering, and, above all, to what extent He can ensure that spiritual entities such as human beings can exist after death and thus actualize their potentialities” (Judycki 2018, 28). Besides, the processual nature of mystical states is not limited to the spiritual life of individuals. Judycki suggests that it should also be seen in the context of entire religious systems. In this perspective, not all experiences of God are equivalent, but can only show different moments of the “mystic way.” Moreover, “the subjects of mystical states, in the first stages of experiencing them, may describe their experiences with the help of a conceptual apparatus taken from the level of everyday life, while only later they may refer to the concepts of their own religion” (Judycki 2018, 28). In conclusion, on the question of the universality and cultural relativity of mystical states, Judycki recognizes the existence of a transcultural and transhistorical community of contents revealed by mystical experience.

4.10. Critique of “Mystical Identity”

Judycki, however, opposes due to both epistemological and metaphysical reasons considerable part of the mystical tradition that interprets union with God in terms of the disappearance of subject-object dualism and a kind of “mystical identity” (Judycki 2018, 29). On both the cognitive and ontic levels, as a result of a kind of “mystical unification,” the relations would tend to disappear, and then mystical states would “cease to be experiences of anything.” “Every object is identical with itself, and when it acquires all the properties of another object, then it ceases to exist” (Judycki 2018, 30). Instead of epistemic and ontic identification, Judycki proposes to refer to the experience of unity in terms of a “peculiar kind of closeness” (Judycki 2018, 30; cf. Judycki 2014, 146).

5. Leszek Kołakowski²⁶

In his reflection on the nature of mysticism and mystical experience, Kołakowski offers several significant terminological clarifications.

5.1. Broad and Narrow Meaning of the Adjective "Mystical"

He distinguishes two basic senses of the use of the adjective "mystical." In its broad and very widespread sense, the adjective "denotes any experience, people interpret as bringing them into direct contact with a non-human spiritual reality, whether or not God's presence is believed to be involved" (Kołakowski 1982, 98; 1988, 103). On the other hand, in the narrower sense, the adjective "mystical" is used to denote a mystical experience, which essentially takes place "if the person undergoing it feels himself to be in direct contact with God (no matter whether God is clearly and vividly experienced as a personal presence, or rather as the indefinable spiritual foundation of all being)" (Kołakowski 1982, 98; 1988, 103). Usually, an experience of this kind is associated with an intense affect of love and an unusually strong desire for union with God (Kołakowski 1982, 99; 1988, 103–4). Kołakowski emphasises that such a meaning does not refer only to this kind of experience, but also to its literary expression, or to any doctrine that considers such an experience as "both possible and genuine, not only in a psychological sense but in the sense that it really is what it claims to be" (Kołakowski 1982, 99; 1988, 104).

²⁶ Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009), philosopher, historian of ideas, promoter and critic of Marxism, co-founder of the so-called Warsaw school of historians of ideas, political activist; essayist, publicist and novelist, populariser of knowledge. Associated mainly with the University of Warsaw and Oxford, where he was essentially concerned with the history of philosophy, the history of ideas and the philosophy of culture and religion; at the University of Warsaw, he headed the Department of the History of Modern Philosophy. Cf. Ptaszek 2011. An essential source for learning about Kołakowski's views on the nature of mysticism are two book publications: Kołakowski 1982 (translated in 1988), 1997.

5.2. Directness of Mystical Experience

Mystical experience, in all its ineffability, is, according to the author, “the core of religious life” (Kołakowski 1982, 99; 1988, 104). It is precisely in contrast to religious experiences that mystical experience places one in direct proximity to the living God, who no longer appears as an object of faith inherited from one’s ancestors or of some sublime theological speculation, but as “direct ‘touch’,” religiously and cognitively unmediated. It is this directness that constitutes the most profound characteristic of mystical experience. “This experience,” Kołakowski emphasises, “is ‘direct’ – as if it were sensory perception, touching or tasting, as opposed to the conceptual grasping, of the divine – and yet it is not sensory at all: it might be, but need not be, associated, preceded by, visions and other sensory perceptions, but the great mystics have never attached much importance to those secondary phenomena” (Kołakowski 1982, 100; 1988, 105).²⁷ Elsewhere, he explains the nature of this directness as follows: “It is furthermore a question of ‘direct’ communication, i.e. not through discursive and conceptual understanding, not through actions adequately expressible in words, but through ‘experience’, i.e. contact analogous to sensory perceptions, though having an immaterial soul and another immaterial entity as its components. The nature of this experience is defined by mystics, as a rule, by analogies with strong sensory states – mainly because it is not mediated by conceptual tools – and it is questionable whether one can go beyond analogies in its characterization” (Kołakowski 1997, 25).

5.3. Mysticism as an Experience and as a Doctrine

Another extremely important distinction that Kołakowski draws a clear distinction between mysticism as the practice of mystical experience and mysticism as the overall doctrine (cf. Kołakowski

²⁷ Kołakowski emphasises that, faced with such an experience, “no mystic has tried to ‘prove’ God’s existence: to him, this would be like trying to prove that honey is sweet or perhaps that water is wet” (Kołakowski 1982, 100; 1988, 106).

1997, 22).²⁸ Mysticism as the mere mystical experience [“mistyka”] consists of various psychological phenomena, ascetic practices and states of the mystics. Mysticism as the doctrine [“mistycyzm”] is a specific theological interpretation of mystical experience, a theoretical framework for interpreting mystical states.

5.4. The Universal Concept of Mysticism

By critically analyzing the various dictionary definitions of mysticism as the doctrine in the literature on the subject, he constructs his own concept which, in the author’s view, is sufficiently capacious to encompass everything to which the adjective “mystical” is sometimes applied. Kołakowski’s own definition of mysticism, understood in this way, is as follows:

The doctrine according to which it is possible, under certain conditions, for the human soul, which is a certain reality distinct from the human body, to communicate by means of an experience (non-sensory though analogous, by its directness, to that which occurs in the contact of the human senses with their objects) with that spiritual reality which preserves primordially (in time, in creation or in conditioning) with respect to every other reality; furthermore, it is assumed that this communication, accompanied by the intense affect of love, and at the same time free from the participation of the physical powers of man, constitutes a particularly desirable good and that it is, at least in its most intense forms, the highest good that man can achieve in earthly life. (Kołakowski 1997, 25–26)

Mysticism, understood in this way, encompasses the “essential features of a phenomenon,” among which Kołakowski counts the following:

²⁸ Kołakowski uses the term “mistyka” for the mystical experience and “mistycyzm” for the theory of mysticism.

1. the conviction of the integral corruption of the human nature dependent on itself, or at least of its incapacity to participate positively in the creation of values;
2. total contempt for “natural” secular and theological knowledge and the recognition of mystical experience as essentially ineffable (which, moreover, stems from its direct character);
3. the idea of a totally disinterested love (renouncing one’s own salvation as the driving motive behind both action and love);
4. the negation of time, the absence of the past and the future in the perception of the world, or even the denial of any reality of time other than illusory, subjective or phenomenal;
5. the recognition of the antagonism of individuality (especially the use of one’s own will) and perfection;
the recognition of the antagonism of the creature and the creator
6. considered as objects of moral stance (an antagonism that can be resolved in ultimate unity). (Kołakowski 1997, 26)

The above definition of mysticism not only encompasses all the essential characteristics of mystical experience, but also takes into account – according to Kołakowski – “an infinite number of variants,” namely it affirms the multiplicity of religious and doctrinal contexts in which the mystical experience is realized, and thus is applicable to every possible analysis of this phenomenon. Drawing on this definition, it is possible, in the author’s opinion, “to consider different types of mysticism, their controversies and convergences” (Kołakowski 1997, 27), for

it encompasses both a complete identification of the soul with God (or an primordial identity to which one only has to return) and various partial unions; pantheistic and other doctrines and for example, orthodox Catholicism; it encompasses various types of mystical doctrines developed by various religions, both extremely monotheistic, such as Islam, and atheistic, such as Buddhism; it further encompasses mystical practice as a state of complete passivity, yet also as a form of intentional human activity; as exceptional moments of ecstasy and as a permanent *habitus*, independent of any physical conditions and unrelated

to moments of ecstatic eclipses; this definition also encompasses any number of conditions that are deemed necessary for the mystical union to take place; the preservation or annihilation of the human personality in mystical states; and includes within these limits the various understandings of the absolute and the soul, as well as a plethora of religious doctrines within which mystical currents or theories arose. (Kořakowski 1997, 27)

Therefore, as can be seen, Kořakowski's delineation between mysticism as the mystical practice and mysticism as the doctrine, of those discussed in this paper, is the most universal and this accounts for its original value.

6. Summary

The subject of the analyses presented in this article were five theories based on the phenomenon of mystical experience in human life. Five philosophers attempted to explore the nature of mystical experience and, on this basis, construct a specific conception of mystical practice (or mystical doctrine).

Two authors (Mieczysław Gogacz and Piotr Moskal) assumed in their investigations that the normative paradigm for the whole spectrum of mystical experiences is Christian mysticism. They placed their analyses in a strictly defined philosophical context, using a conceptual apparatus derived from Thomism. Their reflections resulted in a philosophically significant analysis of mystical experience and its fundamental attribute, i.e. the cognitive directness. It is also extremely valuable to draw attention to the personalistic relationality of Christian mysticism, its community-forming character and the connection of the mystical life with the highest moral standards. As far as interpretation is concerned, it is important to emphasize the inseparable link between mystical theory and specific theological and anthropological concepts as the context of mystical experience, which is of considerable significance for its overall understanding.

The three other discussed authors (Jan Andrzej Kłoczowski, Stanisław Judycki and Leszek Kořakowski) attempted to transcend

the philosophical and theological conditions of a particular religion and build a mystical theory that aspired to universal applicability. Kłoczowski took the path of defining general characteristics of mystical experience and, on their basis, building a typology of various forms of mystical consciousness depending on their religious or worldview conditions. Judycki, while differentiating between various types of mystical experience, also constructs tools to verify their authenticity. He takes into account the broad context of mystical states (mystical existentials, proto-mystical experiences, horizontal experience of God's presence) and their relations with the system of religious and philosophical assertions and concepts that operate in the background of mystical experience. Kołakowski, on the other hand, went in the direction of terminological precision in order to construct a concept of mysticism with such a broad scope that it was able to encompass all possible religious and philosophical circumstances in which concrete mystical theories develop.

Contrary to appearances, these five approaches arising from analyses of the phenomenon of human mystical consciousness are remarkably complementary. In their view of the nature of mystical experience, each author saw a similarly broad range of interrelated issues. They all emphasized the essentially religious context of mystical life, its peculiar passivity, its cognitive inaccessibility to the external observer, its fundamental ineffability and the associated metaphorical nature of its expression, and its problematic nature in assessing the somatic aspects of spiritual experiences.

However, if we assume that the contemporary debate on mystical experience – and indeed on the very concept of mysticism – encompasses a full spectrum of diverse issues, then the question arises: which of the authors offers the most comprehensive treatment of the “mystical question”? Among the many problems addressed by contemporary thinkers engaged with mysticism, the following stand out: the nature, essential characteristics, and typology of mystical experience across various religious contexts; the issue of perennialism, that is, the search for a common core underlying all mystical experiences across different religious traditions; the problem of constructivism, which focuses on the differentiating significance of religious and cultural conditioning and its influence on the specific understanding

– or construction – of mystical experience; the question of mysticism’s objectivity and credibility; and its axiological dimension.

In view of the above, it should be concluded that the most comprehensive conception of mysticism among the philosophers discussed in this study is presented by Stanisław Judycki. The remaining authors approach the aforementioned issues in a profound yet selective manner, concentrating on preferred topics considered primarily from within the framework of the Christian tradition – a focus that is entirely understandable and justified, given the contextual nature of mysticism itself. Similarly, the need to universalize the discourse on mystical experience in all its diversity and complexity – something that requires transcending the boundaries of one’s own religious tradition – is not always granted the time and attention it deserves. Moreover, the treatment of specific questions through the interpretive lens of Thomistic philosophy contributes only to a limited explanation of certain epistemological and metaphysical aspects of mysticism.

Nonetheless, the complementarity and essential noncontradiction of the approaches discussed above may serve as a valuable foundation for constructing a cognitively fruitful synthesis of various perspectives on the mystical life of the human being in their journey toward the Absolute.

Natura doświadczenia mistycznego z różnych perspektyw filozoficznych

Abstrakt: Wraz z niesłabnącym od kilkadziesiątu już lat kulturowym zainteresowaniem duchowością i mistyką w różnych ich wymiarach i znaczeniach pojawia się potrzeba pogłębionej refleksji filozoficzno-teologicznej nad tzw. doświadczeniem mistycznym jako swego rodzaju empirycznym aspektem religii. W poszukiwaniu teoretycznego opracowania fenomenu życia mistycznego człowieka w niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano poglądy pięciu filozofów polskich: Mieczysława Gogacza, Piotra Moskala, Jana A. Kłoczowskiego, Stanisława Judyckiego i Leszka Kołakowskiego. W ich publikacjach poszukiwano odpowiedzi na pytania o naturę doświadczenia mistycznego i jego ontyczne i epistemiczne uwarunkowania oraz charakterystyczne elementy strukturalne. Zwrócono również szczególną uwagę na kontekst życia religijnego, w którym ten rodzaj przeżycia z reguły występuje, a także na samą koncepcję mistyki i mistycyzmu, jakie wyłaniają się z określonego rozumienia natury doświadczenia mistycznego.

Słowa kluczowe: mistyka, mistycyzm, doświadczenie mistyczne, Mieczysław Gogacz, Piotr Moskal, Jan Andrzej Kłoczowski, Stanisław Judycki, Leszek Kołakowski

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