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The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy

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From Oxford University Press : The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy:

1 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Tiffany Medeiros 98 of 99 people found the following review helpful. Must-reading. By Timothy Conway A couple of decades ago, a backlash arose against the notion of a Perennial Philosophy/Psychology (Aldous Huxley, Ken Wilber, et al.) or Primordial Tradition (Frithjof Schuon, Huston Smith, et al.) in the study of mysticism by the so-called "constructivist" camp of scholars, led by Steven Katz and Robert Gimello. This camp can actually be classified within the entire postmodern "deconstructivist" wave of academics who today dominate the humanities and social sciences in general. The postmodern constructivists/deconstructivists accuse perennialists of circular reasoning, naive hermeneutics, and unsound use of primary texts. This camp maintains that there are no cross-culturally shared features of mystical experience, no shared spiritual "core experience," but rather that each person's mystical experience is just his/her ordinary experience, not some true realization of God or Absolute Reality. Thus, mystical experiences are not at all veridical, they cannot point to any true spiritual "Reality" beyond themselves. Katz, et al., think that mystics' experiences are strongly colored by or actually caused and produced by a superimposition of their beliefs and conditioning upon arising experiences. All experience, in other words, is mediated by culture, language, and psycho-physiological factors. No experience is immediate. In response to this attack, Robert Forman and the other fine contributing authors to this volume-- Daniel Matt (The Essential Kabbalah, The Zohar), Anthony Perovich, Philip Almond, Donald Rothberg, Mark Woodhouse

(Paradigm Wars, A Preface to Philosophy), Paul Griffiths, Christopher Chapple, et al., have advanced a powerfully persuasive set of arguments in favor of perennialism and the primordial tradition against the views of the postmodern constructivist/de-constructivist camp. They completely destroy the "constructivist" theory of Katz, Gimello and others, on both logical and empirical grounds. Mind you, the constructivist view is still quite useful in accounting for "visionary" experiences (e.g., the Christian seeing Jesus, the Hindu seeing Krishna) and what have sometimes been called "prophetic" states of consciousness, what Ninian Smart would call "numinous" experiences. Notwithstanding the fact that most religious experiences are "constructed" or mediated by cultural, linguistic, psychological and physiological conditioning, constructivists simply cannot adequately account for the deepest intuitive or contemplative mystical experience, what Forman calls "the Pure Consciousness Event" (PCE), which, because it is formless, has no "contaminating" influence from conditioned forms of thinking, perception or feeling. In other words, the Pure Consciousness Event--what I call "mystical realization of Spirit or Pure Awareness or Absolute Being"--is not shaped by concepts, theological dogmas, symbols, memories, emotions, diet, body type, patterns of social interaction, or anything else. It just is, in all its blessed simplicity and purity. Ostensibly, the PCE is an immediate intuition of the Divine Ground or Absolute Reality, that is, it is a radical form of de-conditioning or liberation and direct experiencing of the Real. Katz would disagree, saying that the perennialist dream of ultimate freedom and God-realization is mere delusion, bereft of evidence. Forman and I would strongly argue against this, on the basis of both direct experience and also the obvious, magnificent freedom of the most acclaimed sages in the sacred traditions whom one can meet or read about (e.g., Meister Eckhart, Juan de la Cruz, the Buddhist and Advaita Vedanta masters, nondual Sufis and Kabbalists, contemplative Taoists, et al.). This freedom or de-conditioning makes a real difference: a method to easily test this is to seat Katz and any spiritual master together in the same meditation hermitage for a month without any distractions, and see who fares well in "the art of just being" and who does not. No contest. Monitoring their brain waves, stress hormone levels, and so forth would show even more clearly that the genuine mystic enjoys a tremendous state of ease under such "trying" circumstances that simply cannot be faked by anyone who has not awakened to the Real.--Timothy Conway, Ph.D., Enlightened-Spirituality.org and author of *Women of Power and Grace: Nine Astonishing, Inspiring Luminaries of Our Time.* 28 of 28 people found the following review helpful. Essential reading for students of mysticism. By A Customer The Problem of Pure Consciousness is essential reading for all students of mysticism. Mystics often report that they experience pure consciousness events, that is, events of consciousness wherein they think nothing, feel nothing and will nothing. The problem is that scholars of mysticism have denied that such events are possible. Scholars argue that all mental events, even mystical ones, are never "pure" -- but always show traces of the individual's intellectual and cultural heritage. By quoting from the great Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, Robert Forman shows that the pure consciousness event is quite clearly described. Other contributors discuss other examples of the pure consciousness event, from various religious traditions. Hats off to Robert Forman and his colleagues, for letting mystics, rather than just scholars of mysticism, speak for the realities of mystical experience!

Are mystical experiences primarily formed by the mystic's cultural background and concepts, as modern day "constructivists" maintain, or do mystics in some way transcend language, belief, and culturally conditioned expectations? Do mystical experiences differ in the different religious traditions, as "pluralists" contend, or are they identical across cultures? Twelve contributors here attempt to answer these questions through close examination of a particular form of mystical experience, "Pure Consciousness"--the experience of being awake but devoid of intentional content for consciousness. The contributors analyze pure consciousness and other mystical experiences from historical Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Jewish sources, as well as from modern mystics. They demonstrate that pure consciousness poses serious conceptual problems for a constructivist understanding of mysticism. Revealing the inconsistencies and inadequacies of current models, they make significant strides towards developing new models for the phenomenon of mysticism, breaking new ground for our understanding of mysticism and of human experience in general.

"A useful contribution to the literature, and should help to foster an ongoing dialogue on the topic."--Philosophy East West "An important contribution that advances the discussion of a very fundamental issue in the comparative study of religions, this book is highly recommended for all libraries supporting religious studies, especially those responsive to the needs of course offerings on mysticism."--Religious Studies From the Back Cover Are mystical experiences formed by the mystic's cultural background and concepts, as 'constructivists' maintain, or do mystics sometimes transcend language, belief, and culturally conditioned expectations? Do mystical experiences differ throughout the various religious traditions, as 'pluralists' contend, or are they somehow ecumenical? The contributors to this collection scrutinize a common mystical experience, the 'pure consciousness event'--the experience of being awake but devoid of intentional content--in order to answer these questions. Through the use of historical Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Jewish mystical writings, as well as those of modern mystics, the contributors reveal the inconsistencies and inadequacies of current models, as make significant strides towards developing new models for the understanding of the mystical phenomenon in particular and of human experience in general. About the Author Robert K.C. Forman is

Associate Professor of Religion at City University of New York's Hunter College, and author of six books and numerous articles on religion and religious experiences.