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# A New Day for Perennialism: the Case for a Perennial Phenomenology, or ‘Soft’ Perennialism

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## Abstract

This paper argues for a ‘perennial phenomenology’ (or ‘soft’ perennialism) varying from the traditionalist notion of a ‘perennial philosophy.’ Perennial phenomenology offers a more nuanced form of perennialism that focuses on spiritual/mystical experiences rather than the teachings and beliefs of different religions. While teachings and beliefs vary greatly, the mystical experiences associated with different mystical traditions have striking commonalities. I suggest four experiential aspects that support a perennial phenomenology. These aspects also necessitate a reconsideration of the debate between perennialism and constructivism. Significantly, these experiential elements are present when mystical experiences occur *outside* the context of spiritual traditions, to people who know little or nothing about spirituality and consider themselves non-religious. Treating mystical experiences exclusively in the context of religion and spiritual traditions has been a major failing in debates between constructivists (or contextualists) and perennialists. There is a common landscape of mystical experience that precedes interpretation and conceptualization by spiritual traditions. This paper contributes to a reopening of discussion about perennialism that has been underway in recent years.

**Keywords** Perennial phenomenology · Soft perennialism · The perennial philosophy · Constructivism · Mysticism · Mystical experiences · Awakening

In recent decades, the concept of a perennial philosophy — originally put forward by scholars such as Schuon (1984), Smith (1987), Nasr (1993), and Oldmeadow (2007) — has become unfashionable. Indeed, in a recent paper in this journal, Richard Jones has suggested that ‘historians and philosophers in religious studies who study mysticism have all but universally abandoned the idea of any transcultural “perennial truths” in favor of a contextualist approach to mystical cultural phenomena and a constructivist view of mystical experiences’ (2022a, 659). In this paper, I will argue that

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such announcements of the death of perennialism are premature. I will argue that it is viable — and indeed, necessary — to posit a more nuanced and tentative form of perennialism. This is a phenomenologically oriented approach — as opposed to a ‘philosophy’ — that I term ‘phenomenological perennialism’ (or ‘soft’ perennialism).

In the main section of the paper, I will suggest four experiential aspects which support this approach: strong commonalities in mystical/spiritual experiences across traditions (and from people unconnected to any traditions); strong commonalities in descriptions of a developmental process of refining and intensifying awareness across traditions, sometimes referred to as ‘awakening’; the transformational process of ‘awakening’ — and the ongoing state of ‘wakefulness’ — outside the context of religious or spiritual traditions; and mystical experiences in children.

In my view, these four factors necessitate a reconsideration of the debate between perennialism and constructivism (that is, the notion that mystical experiences are constructed by individual mystical traditions, or by the beliefs and expectations of individuals connected to the traditions). It is necessary to revisit this debate from a phenomenological perspective, particularly in the light of ‘extra-traditional’ mystical experiences (which occur outside the context of religious or spiritual traditions). While it may appear valid to argue that *intra*-traditional mystical experiences are constructed by cultural discourse (Katz, 1978, 1992), it is much more problematic to argue this when mystical experiences occur to non-adepts with no prior knowledge of mysticism or spirituality, where the correlation between discourse and experience is absent.

In fact, in recent years, the debate between perennialism and constructivism has already been reopened to an extent. According to Sawyer (2021), the last decade or so has seen an ‘increase in support for theories related to the Perennial Philosophy.’ Sawyer (2021) has noted ‘an erosion of confidence in constructivism’ due to the work of scholars such as Studstill (2005), Shah-Kazemi (2006), and Richards (2016). (I would add Rose, 2016, and Marshall, 2005, 2014, to the list.) Along with this, there has been ‘clearer understanding of what is specifically meant by the term *perennial philosophy*’ that has helped to dispel ‘wrong understandings and a priori judgments’ (Sawyer, 2021).

This paper will, I hope, further increase support for theories related to perennialism. Thus far, extra-traditional mystical experiences have not been adequately discussed in debates between constructivists and perennialists. In fact, the phenomenological aspect as a whole has been neglected. As Marshall has noted, constructivism has been seriously flawed in that its evidence base ‘was not rich, firsthand reports that might have demonstrated the conditioning but abstract mystical ideas and metaphysics, for which experiential sources are often unclear or not at all visible’ (2014, 10). In other words, constructivism (or radical contextualism) does not have a strong phenomenological basis.

## Traditionalist Perennialism

Traditionalist perennial philosophy infers, in Schuon’s terms (1984), the ‘transcendent unity of religions.’ It suggests the universality of all religions and all concepts of God, as exemplified by Nasr’s claim (1994, 16) that ‘To have lived any religion

fully is to have lived all religions.’ This commonality stems from the fact that all religions are manifestations of the same transcendent ultimate reality, expressing the same ‘primordial’ wisdom (Schuon, 1986). All religions’ teachings, including their concepts of God, are derived from this transcendent reality, and therefore contain a ‘common core’ of teachings, with the same essential principles and goals. Despite their outward differences, religions across the globe, throughout human history, ‘unanimously affirm one absolute and transcendent reality’ (Schuon, 1986).

This type of perennialism holds that there is a transcendent aspect of human nature that is one with ultimate reality, and all religions help human beings to realize this essential unity. Human development proceeds along a common path toward the goal of union with a spiritual absolute. The special role of mystics is that they are believed to report experiences of direct access to this ‘primordial’ or transcendent realm. The revelations and insights of mystics constitute the ‘esoteric’ core of religious traditions, which informs the more conventional exoteric forms, and these esoteric traditions. Thus, exoteric religions are like different languages expressing the same basic truths in different vocabulary and syntax, but with the same underlying universal grammatical structures (Smith & Rosemont, 2008).

It should be noted, however, that not all perennialists are traditionalists, espousing a ‘universal religion’ in the manner of Nasr, Schuon, or Smith. As Sawyer (2021) has argued, constructivists such as Katz (1978), Penner (1983), and Prothero (2019) have tended to attack a ‘straw man’ of traditionalist perennialism, whereas in reality ‘the so-called “Perennial Philosophy” is more accurately described as a family of theories—in the manner of Existentialism, Idealism and Postmodernism—rather than as a monolithic or homogeneous ideology.’ In Sawyer (2021), the case of Aldous Huxley is discussed, showing that he did not espouse a ‘universal religion,’ but focused on a cross-cultural noetic *experience*. (In this sense, Huxley’s approach is similar to mine in this paper).<sup>1</sup>

For the traditionalists who do espouse a ‘universal religion’, the enormous diversity in religious expressions is problematic. The philosophical and conceptual doctrines that underpin some religions seem too diverse to be compatible in any sense. There are such vast differences between, say, traditional Christianity, Theravada Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism that it seems difficult to hold that the religions are expressions of the same fundamental principles, and have the same fundamental goals. Although a traditionalist such as William Stoddard claims that ‘all religions

<sup>1</sup> Ferrer (2000) has proposed five different varieties of perennialism within the same broad ‘traditionalist’ approach. First, there is the most simplistic form which posits ‘only one path and one goal for spiritual development’ (2000, 10). Second, there is the ‘esotericist’ form (as espoused by Schuon, 1984, and Smith, 1987), which accepts the diversity of different paths but still holds that they are directed toward a common goal. Third, there is what Ferrer calls ‘perspectivist perennialism,’ which accepts that there are many spiritual goals, but holds that these are simply different interpretations or manifestations of the same Ultimate Reality. Fourth, there is a typological form of perennialism, oriented around ‘diverse expressions or manifestations a single kind of spiritual experience or ultimate reality’ (Ferrer, 2000, 12), such as Walter Stace’s (1964) distinction between introvertive and extrovertive mystical experiences. Finally, there is the structuralist form of perennialism, which sees spiritual development across traditions as unfolding through a hierarchy of deep structures and levels (Ferrer sees Wilber, e.g., 1997, as the most prominent proponent of this form of perennialism).

paths lead to the same summit' (2005, 58), the soteriological goals of, say, Christianity, Hinduism, and Theravada Buddhism are significantly different (Prothero, 2019; Jones, 2022a.). The Buddhist conceptions of multiple rebirths leading to *nirvana* have little in common with the Christian concept of everlasting life in heaven or hell. It is also difficult to hold that all theistic concepts are expressions of the same absolute principle. The God of fundamentalist Christianity is massively different from the multiple gods of Hinduism, or from the animist spirit-based conceptions of some indigenous groups. Theravada Buddhism does not even have a theistic conception.

It is clearly therefore problematic to speak of a common core of teachings across religious or spiritual traditions. However, this does not invalidate perennialism *per se*. It only invalidates the *philosophical* background of perennialism. If one shifts the debate away from philosophy to phenomenology (that is, away from the doctrines of religions, toward the *experiences* of individuals associated with — and most importantly, outside — mystical traditions), then we find a great deal more commonality, and a more nuanced form of perennialism becomes viable (Bilimoria, 2009).

## From Philosophy to Phenomenology

Let me now attempt to provide a brief overview of my notion of a 'perennial phenomenology,' before explaining in detail why I feel it is necessary.

A perennial phenomenology pays less heed to the conceptual and philosophical aspects of traditions (although, as I will point out later, it does highlight some conceptual factors). In fact, the doctrines of conventional religions are of little interest to phenomenological perennialism. As Sawyer (2021) has pointed out, there is a disjuncture between conventional religion and mystical or contemplative traditions. Claims of a common transcendent source for all religions, and for all concepts of divine beings, may be misguided and unnecessary. Rather than being informed by primordial wisdom, many conventional religious traditions — particularly those of a fundamentalist and dogmatic nature — may be largely expressions of psychological factors such as existential insecurity, group identity and belonging, a desire for meaning and purpose, and so on (see Taylor, 2005, for a fuller discussion of possible psychological origins of theistic religion).

However, there have always been individual mystics associated with different traditions who have reported experiences with significant commonalities, as we will see in the next section. The differences between such experiences across traditions occur largely in interpretation and conceptualization rather than in phenomenology. While it may be problematic to separate experience from interpretation, in mystical experiences, there may be a kernel of common phenomenology which is subject to different interpretations. (The possibility of unmediated mystical experience, and the independence of experience or perception from conceptualization, will be discussed later.)

Many mystics have had uneasy relationships with the conventional religious authorities, precisely because their experiences often conflict with some of the tenets of conventional religion. For example, mystics affiliated with monotheistic traditions have often interpreted 'God' in dynamic or energetic terms, as a quality that is

immanent and all-pervading as well as transcendent (Smart, 1965; Hick, 1989). They have also often insisted on the immanence of God within their own being, so that they are essentially one with God. Such insights inevitably led to accusations of heresy. For example, the ninth century Sufi mystic Mansur Al-Hallaj — who proclaimed ‘I am the truth’ and that his spirit was one with God as ‘wine is mingled with pure water’ (in Spenser, 1963, 321) — was imprisoned and executed. The Christian mystic Meister Eckhart — who described how love allows us to ‘enter into’ God, and enables us to ‘know Him as He is’ (in Spenser, 1963, 241) — may well have been imprisoned and executed too, but died of natural causes before his trial for heresy began. Another example from Christianity is Marguerite Porete, author of the mystical treatise *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, who was burnt at the stake for heresy in 1310.

Such cases illustrate the gulf between mystical experiences and conventional religion, contradicting the traditionalist view that exoteric religions are infused with transcendent primordial wisdom, via mystical traditions. Constructivists have not taken sufficient account of this distinction either. As Sawyer has written, ‘This distinction in essences between that of religion and that of mysticism is important to note because it has so often been overlooked, with constructivists usually conflating the two’ (2021). Craig Martin’s (2017) critique of ‘Neo-perennialism’ is an example of this. He chastizes a number of scholars for over-emphasizing the cross-cultural similarities between religions, but barely touches on mystical or contemplative traditions in themselves. Mystics arguably have more in common with other mystics belonging to different traditions than they do with the conventional religions they are associated with (Smart, 1965).

Most significantly of all, such experiential commonalities occur when mystical experiences occur *outside* religious or spiritual traditions, to secular-oriented people who have little or no familiarity with such traditions. This also applies to long-term personal or spiritual development when it occurs outside traditions, including when individuals undergo a shift into an ongoing expansive state of awareness. (We will look at both these areas in more detail shortly.) In these areas, we find a great deal of commonality — much more than in the doctrines of religions and spiritual traditions.

The latter point is extremely important, because if mystical experiences are wholly constructed by religious and spiritual traditions — or more specifically, by the beliefs and expectations of individuals associated with the traditions (e.g., Gimello, 1983; Katz, 1978, 1992) — how can one account for mystical experiences that take place *outside* the context of religious and spiritual traditions, with essentially the same phenomenology as traditional mystical experiences? As Edward Kelly and Michael Grosso have commented, powerful mystical experiences ‘have often occurred spontaneously in “naïve” persons who previously had no commitment to, or involvement, in any particular religious or mystical tradition’ (2007, 516). Not only that, as Kelly and Grosso further note, mystical experiences may occur even in ‘persons who are antecedently hostile to the entire subject’ (Ibid.).

One might conceivably argue that even if a person has no involvement in a particular tradition, there may still be some cultural influences (for example, a religion education, or the experiences of relatives and peers) that dictate the content of the experience. However, there are many reports of mystical experiences from modern secular societies

with a prevailing attitude of scepticism toward spirituality, some of which will be examined presently (e.g., Corneille & Luke, 2021; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). This is not the type of cultural environment that would foster the construction of mystical experiences. If mystical experiences are constructed by beliefs and expectations (Katz, 1978, 1992), why do they happen to people in secular societies who have no religious or spiritual background and lack the associated beliefs and expectations?

As Jones (2022b) has noted, specific types and aspects of mystical experience may be acceptable in secular cultures and be interpreted in naturalistic terms. For example, naturalists such as Harris (2014) and Blackmore (2011) interpret experiences of loss of the sense of self in meditation as confirmation of the materialist view that consciousness is an illusion, and the self does not exist. However, other aspects of mystical experiences are more difficult to justify in naturalistic terms, such as a sense of oneness with all things, heightened awareness, or a sense of timelessness. Such aspects may be ascribed to unusual neurological functioning, rather than authentic experiences of the nature of reality. As will be seen presently, the constructivist view of mystical experiences is even more problematic in relation to childhood mystical experiences, which occur before cultural conditioning could have informed a child's outlook, and often in secular societies that lack the cultural conditioning that would predispose people toward such experiences.

Mystical experiences happen to both the religious and non-religious. They are part of an expansive range of human experience that can be explored and interpreted from many different perspectives. Different traditions interpret their experiences and explorations of the landscape in terms of their own metaphysical systems, like explorers standing at different vantage points, with a different view of the same landscape. Despite some differences in interpretation, they share clear commonalities. At the same time, this landscape can be explored outside the context of different religious or spiritual traditions.

My analogy is close to one used by William James, who described mystical experiences as 'windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world. The difference of the views seen from the different mystical windows need not prevent us from entertaining this supposition' (1986, 428). James was clear that this 'wider world of meanings' contains a great deal of variety—in his words 'a mixed constitution like that of this world' (Ibid.)—and hence a great range of perspectives and interpretations.

## Four Reasons Why a 'Perennial Phenomenology' Is Necessary

Let me turn to the four experiential aspects that necessitate a form of perennialism, since they cannot be explained in constructivist factors.

### Commonalities in Mystical/Spiritual Experiences

The first of these is the *strong commonalities in mystical/spiritual experiences across traditions (and from people unconnected to any traditions)*. As they have



been described by individuals and studied by scholars, mystical experiences share certain fundamental characteristics, both inside and outside traditions. The characteristics that are most often attributed to mystical experiences include the following: intense wellbeing (e.g., serenity, bliss, or ecstasy), intensified perception (or heightened awareness, often including a sense of luminosity or radiance), a transcendence of separation (a sense of connection or union, incorporating other human beings, the natural world or to a more obscure transcendent source of being), a sense of the interconnection or unity of phenomena; compassion and love; a transformed (and often expanded) sense of identity; a sense of noetic revelation (e.g., Hardy, 1979; Wainwright, 1981; Happold, 1986; Marshall, 2005; Hood, 2006; Kelly & Grosso, 2007; Wulff, 2014; Jones, 2016, Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017).

Many contemporary scholars of mysticism have emphasized the presence of such characteristics across and outside traditions. For example, Studstill (2005) has highlighted the experiential commonalities between Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen and medieval German mysticism, which have the common aim to 'disrupt the processes of mind that maintain ordinary, egocentric experience and induce a structural transformation of consciousness' (Studstill, 2005, 6). This transformation brings an expansion and enhancement of consciousness, resulting in 'an increasingly sensitized awareness/knowledge of Reality that manifests as (among other things) an enhanced sense of emotional wellbeing, an expanded locus of concern engendering greater compassion for others, an enhanced capacity to creatively negotiate one's environment, and a greater capacity for aesthetic appreciation' (Studstill, 2005, 7).

Similarly, Rose has highlighted the 'contemplative universals' within Theravada Buddhism, Patañjali Yoga, and Catholic mystical theology, with 'virtually identical sets of mystical experience that are induced by the deepening concentration' even though the traditions are associated with 'distinct and doctrinally irreconcilable religious systems' (2016, 3). These include qualities such as tranquillity, unitive awareness, unity between subject and object, timelessness, inner stillness and clarity, mental emptiness and spaciousness, and beatitude.

In addition, Shah-Kamezi (2006) has compared three mystics from different traditions (Shankara from Hinduism, Ibn Arabi from Islam, and Meister Eckhart from Christianity), finding that the three individuals were 'at one when it is a question of the summit of realization—the transcendence of all finite conditioning attendant upon individuality, and the attainment of identity with the unique Absolute' (2006, 248). Blum (2015) similarly compared the writings of Meister Eckhart, Ibn Arabi, and the Chinese Buddhist Huineng, also finding pronounced commonalities. As he has written, 'The social theorist is still at pains to explain why discourses about experience that are so similar to each other happen to have arisen in such variegated communities inhabiting such different contexts' (Blum, 2017, 345). As one further example, the studies of psychedelic-induced mystical experiences by Richards (2016) at John Hopkins University have led him to conclude that the experiences are indistinguishable to those described in traditional mystical literature. As he has summarized, his evidence 'represents a strong swing of the theoretical pendulum back toward the so-called perennialist perspective' (2016, 11).

Quantitative research using Ralph Hood's Mysticism Scale (or M-Scale) (1975) also highlights such commonalities, showing that the same 'common core' of



characteristics (such as unity, timelessness, intense wellbeing, sacredness, and a noetic quality) occurs across varied traditions (e.g., Hood et al., 2001; Chen et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2011). Hood's research makes it clear that such experiences can be *interpreted* in different ways, without detracting from their essential commonality, and without necessarily leading to any common theology or philosophy (Hood, 2006).

A study by Taylor & Egeto-Szabo (2017) focused on extra-traditional mystical experiences. Using the term 'awakening experience,' 91 reports of experiences were collected and analyzed, in which a person's awareness of reality intensified and expanded, with characteristics such as an enhanced sense of reality, beauty, connection, meaning, and harmony. The study examined the triggers or contexts of such experiences, finding that the most significant trigger was psychological turmoil (such as stress, depression, loss, bereavement), linked to 40.5% of the experiences. Other significant triggers were contact with nature (25%), spiritual practice (23.5%), and reading spiritual literature (16.5%). Note that some experiences had more than one trigger or context, hence the numerical discrepancy. Most of the experiences occurred outside the context of traditional spirituality — in fact, many of the participants who sent reports had no connection to any spiritual tradition, no prior knowledge of spirituality and mysticism, and lived in secular cultures.

Nevertheless, the phenomenology of the experiences was essentially the same as tradition-based mystical experiences (for example, Happold, 1986; Hood, 2006; Jones, 2016). In order of frequency, the characteristics of the experiences included positive affective states (such as peace, joy, sense of harmony, lack of fear), intensified perception (aliveness, brightness, energy, light), a sense of connection or oneness, love/compassion, different time perception, deeper general 'knowing,' a sense of transcending time and space, and so on.

It is difficult to understand how such experiences could be culturally constructed when they did not occur in any spiritual or religious context, but in secular cultures that are not supportive of spirituality. How could they have been constructed by beliefs and expectations when most participants lacked any mystical or religious background, or even any knowledge of spirituality? Marshall has made a similar point that the constructivist interpretation of mystical experiences 'fails to address the many "spontaneous" experiences recorded in modern times that take place outside any conditioning tradition of teaching and practice' (2014, 10). Jones has additionally noted that some 'mystical experiences occur spontaneously to people with no mystical training or religious background' (2016, 64).

## Common Depictions of Self-transformation in Traditions

The second experiential aspect which supports phenomenological perennialism is *strong commonalities in descriptions of a developmental process of refining and intensifying awareness across traditions, sometimes referred to as 'awakening.'* Every spiritual tradition — including Buddhism, yoga, Taoism, the Kabbalah, Christian mysticism, and so forth — posits some path of self-development toward increasing awareness and self-realization. They all describe certain experiential

features which arise in this process, and which can be cultivated through spiritual practices.

Phenomenological perennialism holds that there is a similar general orientation in these paths of self-development, with a number of shared qualities and themes. The paths may not move toward exactly the same goal — for example, in the sense that the Buddhist conception of *bodhi* differs from the Hindu Yogic concepts of *moksha* or *sahaja samadhi*, or the mystical Christian concept of *deification* — but they move in the same general direction.

In Taylor (2017), seven common themes were identified in depictions of such a process across various traditions. These are (1) increasing and intensifying awareness; (2) a movement beyond separateness and toward connection and union; (3) cultivating inner stillness and emptiness; (4) developing increased inner stability, self-sufficiency, and equanimity; (5) a movement toward increased empathy, compassion, and altruism; (6) the relinquishing of personal agency; and (7) a movement toward enhanced wellbeing. These themes occur across all traditions, including Buddhism, Hindu Vedanta or Yoga, Taoism, mystical Christianity, Sufism, and so forth.

These themes are certainly emphasized to different degrees in certain traditions. For example, the collective altruistic aspect of development is strongly emphasized in Jewish and Sufi mysticism, while the cultivation of equanimity and self-sufficiency is strongly emphasized in Buddhism. At the same time, the aspect of relinquishing one's personal agency is strongly emphasized in Daoism. Although it is clear that many traditions place a great deal of emphasis on union, this does not feature directly in Theravada Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism—and perhaps Buddhism in general—places more emphasis on cultivating equanimity and selflessness than on attaining union (Taylor, 2017).

Nevertheless, the overall similarities are striking. Returning to my earlier metaphor, such overlapping conceptual features arise because awakening — both as a temporary experience and as a developmental process — involves an exploration of the same range of expansive human experience.

## Awakening Outside Traditions

The same themes also occur *outside* traditions, when the process of 'spiritual awakening' occurs in an extra-traditional context, to people who know little or nothing about religion or spirituality. The qualities that emerge in spiritual awakening may also become established as ongoing traits, when an individual attains a stable state of 'wakefulness.' Here, in a non-traditional sense, 'wakefulness' can be defined as an ongoing expansive and intense awareness, and also a higher-functioning state in which a person's vision of and relationship to the world are transformed, along with their subjective experience, their sense of identity, and their conceptual outlook (Taylor, 2017). This is the third experiential factor which supports a soft perennialism: *the transformational process of 'awakening' — and the ongoing state of 'wakefulness' — outside the context of religious or spiritual traditions.*

There are many cases of ‘natural mystics’ from a non-religious background, who appear to have experienced wakefulness as an innate quality, without following any spiritual paths or practices, or even any prior knowledge of mysticism or spirituality. Such naturally awakened people often become creative artists, using poetry or art as a way of expressing their heightened awareness. They may also sometimes become social activists, due to their intense sense of intersubjective connection, bringing intense empathy and compassion, or a sense of mission to alleviate suffering or injustice. Some examples are Walt Whitman, D.H. Lawrence, the English nature mystic Richard Jeffries, and the American social activist who called herself ‘Peace Pilgrim’ (Taylor, 2017).

Let me examine two examples in more detail. Walt Whitman was highlighted by Bucke (1969) as a case of ‘cosmic consciousness,’ and also by Maslow (1994) as an example of a ‘self-actualized’ person. Whitman’s form of mysticism was highly idiosyncratic, and unrelated to any particular spiritual tradition. His experience of the world was intensely pantheistic, with a strong sense of a spiritual force pervading both all phenomena and his own being. He was never affiliated with any spiritual tradition, nor did he follow any conventional spiritual practice. In his later years, Whitman did develop some familiarity with Indian philosophy but apparently without deep or detailed knowledge. When Henry David Thoreau met Whitman, the former remarked that *Leaves of Grass* was ‘wonderfully like the orientals.’ Thoreau asked Whitman if he had read such works, and the latter replied, ‘No, tell me about them’ (Cowley, 1973, 919).

Once Indian spiritual texts became more widely available, many observers noticed parallels with Whitman’s work, and sought evidence that he was influenced by them. However, as the literary critic Malcolm Cowley remarked, ‘What is extraordinary about this Eastern element is that Whitman, when he was writing the poems of the first edition [of *Leaves of Grass*] seems to have known little or nothing about Eastern philosophy. It is more than doubtful that he had even read the Bhagavad-Gita, one of the few Indian works then available in translation’ (1973, 972). Rather, as Cowley suggests, Whitman’s mysticism seems to have been completely natural and spontaneous.

A similar but lesser-known natural mystic is the mid-nineteenth century British nature writer Richard Jefferies, who wrote a remarkable ‘spiritual autobiography’ called *The Story of my Heart*. Jefferies almost certainly had no knowledge of spiritual traditions or religious mystics. Nevertheless, as the mystical scholar F.C. Happold wrote of him:

He found that “eternal now” of which the mystics had spoken. He reached a doctrine of the “nobility of the soul,” which is akin to Eckhart and Shankara. Though the only idea of God with which he was acquainted was that of the religion of his own environment, in his condition of a “deity beyond deity” he tried to express in fumbling words what Eckhart and Ruysbroeck had expressed so much more adequately in the distinction they drew between the Godhead and God (Happold, 1986, 385).

In my own research, I have focused on the phenomenon of ‘transformation through turmoil,’ when spiritual awakening arises in the context of intense

psychological turmoil, such as bereavement, a diagnosis of cancer, addiction, intense stress, or depression. Individuals who undergo transformation through turmoil experience a shift into a higher-functioning state. They report feeling reborn, even as if they are different people living in the same body, with a powerful sense of inner wellbeing, intensified perception, a stronger sense of connection (or oneness) to other people and to nature, and so on (Taylor, 2012, 2013, 2021a, 2021b). The phenomenology of such states is very close to that of temporary mystical (or awakening) experiences, and also to the ongoing wakefulness or realization depicted by diverse spiritual traditions.

The causes of transformation through turmoil are mysterious, although I have suggested a connection to ego-dissolution (caused by intense psychological pressure or the loss of psychological attachments). Although ego-dissolution is usually a powerful negative experience, equivalent to breakdown, in a small minority of people, it appears to allow a latent higher self to emerge. This latent higher self seems to be fully formed as a structure, ready to take over as a person's new identity. The transition can sometimes be difficult, with challenges of acceptance and integration, particularly if (as is often the case) the individuals are from a non-spiritual background, and lack understanding of their experiences (Taylor, 2012, 2013, 2021a, 2021b).

Although any period of intense turmoil or trauma may give rise to such a transformation, the most common trigger appears to be bereavement. In Taylor (2021a), the cases of 16 individuals who reported powerful transformational experiences following bereavement were examined, using a mixed methods approach, including a qualitative thematic analysis of interviews and two psychometric scales. Both approaches found significant evidence of positive personal change, which had remained stable over long periods of time (a mean of over 13 years since the original bereavement experiences). Two psychometric measures showed significantly higher than normal levels of spirituality and 'wakefulness.'

As with temporary awakening experiences, a significant aspect of these transformational experiences is that they frequently happen outside the context of religious and spiritual traditions, to individuals in secular cultures who — as mentioned above — sometimes struggle to make sense of their new state. Therefore, these cases cannot be explained in constructivist terms. Again, such experiences suggest a range of expansive human experience which is not the sole preserve of spiritual traditions.

## Mystical Experiences in Childhood

The fourth experiential factor is *mystical experiences in children*. Research has shown that temporary awakening experiences are not uncommon during childhood. Robinson (1977) and Hoffman (1992) both found that mystical/spiritual experiences could occur as early as 3 years old, although they were most common between the ages of 5 and 15. Robinson (1977) studied 600 childhood spiritual experiences, and found that 10% occurred before the age of 5, 70% between 5 and 15, and 19% after the age of 15. While of the 123 experiences collected by Hoffman (1992), 23% occurred before the age of 5, and 77% between 5 and 15. Similarly, in a survey of

grammar school pupils and young college students by Pafford (1973), 40% of boys and 61% of girls said that they had had experiences of ‘nature mysticism’ similar to those described by the poet William Wordsworth. While in Alister Hardy’s research at the Oxford University Religious Research Unit, childhood and adolescence were the most common frequencers of religious experience: 111.7 from a thousand during childhood, and 123.7 during adolescence (Hardy, 1979).

In one example from my own collection, a man — now middle-aged — from a non-religious background described a powerful mystical experience that occurred when he was about 6 years old. He was running out his front door to play with his friends when, ‘Everything just melted. I looked at the tarry telegraph pole outside of my friend’s house four doors up. It was just pulsating with life and energy; the road surface was the same...I was made up of the same pulsating energy. Time just melted as well’ (in Taylor, 2017, 54).

It is problematic to suggest that such experiences could be constructed by religious or spiritual traditions when a significant proportion of them occurred before cultural conditioning could have fully informed a child’s outlook, and when — in any case — the children were from a non-religious background. Forman (1999) has put forward similar arguments in relation to what he has termed the ‘pure consciousness event,’ noting that this experience of contentless wakeful consciousness can be experienced by neophytes—including children—as well as by experienced spiritual practitioners.<sup>2</sup>

One might question the validity of reports of childhood mystical experiences because they are retrospective, perhaps based on unreliable memories and conveyed in language that young children could not possibly use. It could be argued that adults simply construct such experiences in later life, based on their knowledge of mystical experiences or their religious or spiritual beliefs. However, mystical experiences are so powerful and unusual that they are likely to be remembered more vividly and with less distortion than other experiences. A child may well find such an experience difficult to describe at the time, but retain a clear memory of it, and later find the vocabulary to describe it. It should be noted that there is often a gulf between mystical experiences and their linguistic expression (hence James’s, 1986, characterization of the experiences as ineffable). Mystical experiences are always difficult to convey — for adults as well as children — because of the subject/object duality and distinct tenses of languages, and the paucity of vocabulary for refined and unusual states of consciousness. In other words, a gulf between a childhood mystical experience and its later description does not necessarily mean that the experience is wholly constructed.

<sup>2</sup> In addition, Forman (1999) has argued that the ubiquity of descriptions of the pure consciousness event across cultures is evidence of perennialism, and that it is meaningless to speak of the cultural construction of an experience which has no conceptual content.

## Other Arguments Against Constructivism

These four factors strongly suggest a common underlying phenomenology to mystical experiences. In doing so, they present a strong case against constructivist or contextualist interpretations.

Let me make it clear that I do not wish to argue against constructivism *per se*, only against the constructivism in the context of mystical experiences. A wide-ranging debate about constructivism is beyond the remit of this paper, but I would certainly not want to argue that all cultural constructivism is false. Neither would I wish to entirely reject constructivism as a factor in mystical experiences. I would accept that many intra-traditional mystical experiences are at least partially constructed by cultural influences. This may also be true of some extra-traditional mystical experiences. At the same time, I support the possibility of entirely unconstructed mystical experiences. At the most intense levels of mystical experience, when individual identity merges into oneness with all reality — an ecstatic non-dual experience in which one becomes aware that the spiritual essence of one's own being is the essence of all things, and of reality itself — I believe that the mystic experiences what Studstill has described as 'an unconditioned, unmediated experience of the Real' (2005, 26). In an introvertive sense, this is also true of what Forman (1999) terms the 'pure consciousness event.'

My argument is simply that constructivism does not suffice as a *complete* explanation of mystical experiences, since they include common transcultural qualities that cannot be explained in terms of cultural discourse, or beliefs or expectations. It is also perhaps useful to think in terms of 'strong' and 'moderate' forms of constructivism (Jones, 2020). Whereas strong constructivists such as Katz (1978, 1992) or Gimello (1983) argue that every mystical experience is entirely constructed by cultural conditioning, a moderate constructivist such as John Hick (1989) holds that there may be a transcultural element to some mystical experiences, although structuring is always present. In these terms, my argument is directed at *strong* constructivism.

The above four points are certainly not the only arguments against strong constructivism. Both Marshall (2005, 2014) and Jones (2016) have raised several other difficulties. In relation to intra-traditional experiences, they have both pointed out that the experiences often diverge from the contexts and concepts of the traditions that mystics are associated with, which is not what we would expect if doctrines dictated the content of the experiences. As Jones has put it, 'the content of mystical experiences often comes as a shock or even a surprise to trained mystics' (2016, 64). As Marshall has pointed out, the 'novel nature of experiences that deviate significantly from the expectations of the conditioning tradition' (2014, 10) is impossible to account for in strong constructivist terms. Of course, this is why (as highlighted above) many mystics have been condemned as heretical by religious authorities, sometimes resulting in excommunication and even execution. Again, this would not be the case if the content of mystical experiences was determined by doctrine.

Both Marshall and Jones have also suggested that (strong) constructivists over-estimate the influence of the conceptualization process on experience or

perception. Whether experience is separable from interpretation is a contested issue (Segal, 2014), a full discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, there are some grounds for believing that, at least in some contexts, perception may operate independently of — and precede — cognition and interpretation. One argument is that, from an evolutionary perspective, experience is surely independent of cognition and interpretation. Some animals — and other life forms — appear to lack the capacity for cognition but are clearly capable of experience or perception (Blum, 2014). Cognition (conferring the ability to theorize and interpret) is a later evolutionary development which relates to different neurological structures, and so is essentially independent of experience. In relation to mystical experience, Marshall has contended that ‘the power of theories and beliefs to condition perception has firm limits’ (2005, 187). Like Marshall and Forman (1999), Jones (2016) accepts the possibility of non-conceptual or non-cognitive experience, suggesting that the ‘depth-mystical’ event is a direct experience, which is only later conceptualized. In other words, perception is a relatively raw and unfiltered process, which is only later interpreted or conceptualized.

It is important to note that all experiences are not *equally* conditioned. Some experiences may be *less* mediated and filtered than others. It is also possible to consciously *decondition* the mind in order to make our experience less mediated and filtered. In fact, this could be seen as another common theme across mystical traditions (related to the above-mentioned cross-traditional theme of cultivating inner stillness and emptiness): the use of techniques or practices to decondition the mind, or deconstruct ordinary conceptual processes. This is the primary aim of Buddhist practices of observing the mind’s labelling process, and transcending conceptual cognition, while many Christian mystics (and neo-Platonists such as Plotinus) emphasized the importance of letting go of the workings of the intellect and transcending ordinary mentation. This is the aim of the *via negativa* described by Dionysus the Areopagite, or Meister Eckhart’s concept of detachment. As Kelly and Grosso have noted, ‘When mystics talk about inhibiting the modifications of the mind and going beyond or becoming detached from all “created” (read, constructed) things, they understand their challenge precisely as that of systematically overcoming the sort of conditioning that Katz and his allies assume without question cannot be overcome’ (2007, 515). At a more fundamental level, this is one of the main purposes of the practice of meditation: to bring about a deconstruction of normal mental structures, and to attain what Deikman (1980) referred to as a ‘deautomatization of perception.’

The ultimate aim of these processes of deconditioning is to attain a *wholly* unconditioned state in which the mind appears to be empty of concepts and constructs. In its introvertive form, this state is equivalent to Forman’s (1999) pure consciousness event. Saso (2015) has used the term ‘apophatic union’ for this state, and like Forman, has suggested that the use of practices to generate the state is a fundamental commonality among diverse spiritual traditions. This state may also occur in an extrovertive form, when the individual perceives an unmediated phenomenal world in which individuality (itself a conceptual construct) dissolves into oneness with all reality. In this sense, mystical experiences themselves provide evidence of the potential independence of experience and cognition.



Meanwhile, Marshall (2005) has also highlighted the issue of difficulty of expression. If mystical experiences were constructs of traditions, surely it would be easy to describe them with reference to the concepts of these traditions. However, this is frequently not the case. As James (1986) pointed out, mystical experiences often have a characteristic of ‘ineffability.’ Rather than being the product of language (as Katz believed), the experiences often seem to transcend language, and so are difficult to communicate.

## Ontological Issues

In its emphasis on experience, phenomenological perennialism is closely linked to essentialism. Some scholars use the terms perennialism and essentialism interchangeably (for example, Dible, 2010; Hollenback, 1996) while others—such as Almond (1988), Marshall (2005), and Rose (2016) — see perennialism and essentialism as distinct. According to the latter view, essentialism (like phenomenological perennialism) emphasizes the common features of mystical or spiritual experiences and practices in different traditions, in contrast to the traditional perennialist focus on doctrine. For example, Rose has associated perennialism with ‘religious doctrines and symbolism’ and essentialism with ‘contemplative experiences’ (2016, 4).<sup>3</sup>

However, I do not view phenomenological perennialism as wholly equivalent to essentialism. As well as focusing on experience, soft perennialism focuses on certain *conceptual* aspects of traditions, which are closely linked to — and derived from — mystical experiences. In other words, I believe that the commonalities of mystical experiences across and outside spiritual traditions suggest certain *ontological* aspects. In terms of the landscape metaphor, reports of views from different perspectives (and explorations of different areas) contain certain overlapping or common features, from which one can infer fundamental features of the landscape.

This is a controversial issue, since the link between phenomenology and ontology is difficult to establish, and it is possible to explain phenomenological similarities in terms of neurological or psychological factors. Nevertheless, one of the strongest aspects of mystical or awakening experiences is their noetic revelatory quality. Almost every mystical experience carries a powerful sense of conviction, with the individual feeling that they have glimpsed a wider and fuller reality that is hidden to normal awareness. As James put it, mystical experiences appear to be ‘windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world’ (1986, 428). A constructivist might argue that the revelatory aspect is simply a confirmation of pre-existing beliefs, but this does not apply to extra-traditional experiences, or to intra-traditional experiences where mystical experiences conflict with traditional belief systems. If mystical experiences are interpreted in terms of an expansion and intensification of awareness, such claims of revelation seem logical.

<sup>3</sup> A similar perspective has also been taken by Forman (1999) and Parsons (2008), who have discussed a ‘perennial psychology’ which emphasizes mystical experience over the concepts and teachings of traditions. Their approaches can be seen as antecedents of perennial phenomenology.

In mystical experiences, psychological filters and structures which constrict normal human awareness appear to fall away.

There are several arguments in favor of the ontological significance of mystical experiences, which I will briefly mention. Their powerful, long-lasting transformational effects suggest a profound revelatory quality, beyond what one would expect from an experience merely due to a neurological quirk, or aberration. After all, hallucinatory experiences rarely bring long-lasting after-effects, and are usually quickly forgotten, with a sense that they were delusory. This contrasts with mystical experiences, which carry a sense of being *more* real than ordinary awareness. In the above cited study on the transformational effects of bereavement (Taylor, 2021a), all participants reported major, apparently deep-rooted changes of attitude, behavior, and lifestyle which had been sustained over long periods of time. The mean length of time since transformation was 13 years. Three participants' bereavement experiences occurred while they were teenagers (aged 14 to 16), and all three reported that the experience had helped to determine the career and lifestyle paths they had chosen for their adult lives. This is also illustrated by Walter Pahnke's (1966) well-known 'Good Friday Experiment' in which a group of theology students were given doses of psilocybin in a religious setting. They all had powerful mystical experiences, including feelings of ecstasy, awe, and oneness. In a follow-up study 25 years later by Doblin (1991), most of the original participants reflected that the experience had changed them permanently, giving them a deeper appreciation of life and nature, an increased sense of joy, a reduced fear of death, and greater empathy for minorities and oppressed people.

The striking phenomenological similarities between mystical experiences and near-death experiences are also significant. As well as remarkable phenomenological features such as an out of body experience, a journey through darkness toward light and (in many cases) encountering deceased relatives or beings, most near-death experiences incorporate mystical experiences, with qualities such as intense wellbeing, a sense of unity, perception of interconnection or oneness, a sense of meaning and harmony, heightened awareness, and so on (Greyson, 2021; Sartori, 2015). Of course, the objectivity of near-death experiences may be doubted, but the fact that such similar experiences occur in such a different context (with such a different cause) suggests that they may be two different entry points to the same landscape of expansive experience. In a similar way, Marshall (2014) has highlighted the significant overlaps between psi and mystical experiences, and suggested that the strong empirical evidence for psi (Cardeña, 2018; Kelly et al., 2007) supports the objectivity of mystical experience.

One ontological quality implied by mystical experiences is a fundamental *luminosity*. Many mystical experiences feature descriptions of an intense radiance, pervading both the world (in extroverted mystical experiences) and one's inner being (in introverted experiences). As Marshall has put it, 'special experiences of luminosity are a very common, cross-cultural feature of mystical experience' (2014, 6). A quality of luminosity is also ascribed to many ultimate spiritual principles. For example, the Bhagavad-Gita describes the fundamental spiritual principle of *Brahman* as follows: 'If the light of a thousand suns suddenly arose in the sky, that splendour might be compared to the radiance of the Supreme Spirit' (Mascaro, 1990, p.

53). Similarly, the Jewish term *Zohar* can be translated as splendor or brilliance, and the *Zohar* itself—the text—describes the universe as pervaded with translucent light (Hoffman, 2007). Rather than being purely conceptual or symbolic, such notions may stem from direct mystical experience. In Marshall's words, this 'language of light' is 'probably more than symbolism based on universal familiarity with the life-giving sun, for special experiences of luminosity are a very common, cross-cultural feature of mystical experience' (2014, 6). It is significant that translucent light is a feature of many near-death experiences too, where a person is physiologically and neurologically 'dead' for a short time, before resuscitation. For example, one report of an NDE featured a report of a bright light which 'engulfed both my physical and non-physical self...My only awareness was of the brightness of the light, filling me with peace and nourishment' (Taylor, 2018, 98).

Another feature is a sense of fundamental benevolence, harmony, or even love, which may appear as a kind of all-pervading force or energy. As one person who had an extra-traditional awakening experience reported, 'Everything was made of love. I felt immersed in a sea of love where everyone and everything were made of this same "energy"; I was no longer a separate "ego" but was consumed by this energy of love' (Taylor, 2018, 46). Sometimes this sense of love is associated with the previous quality of light, as when one person — in a near-death experience — described 'the light of pure, unconditional love' (Taylor, 113). This perceived quality of all-pervading love and harmony is especially prominent in near-death experiences (Greyson, 2021; Sartori, 2015).

Another ontological feature is fundamental interconnection. In mystical experiences, natural and man-made phenomena no longer appear as separate entities, but as connected, sharing the same essential nature. Sometimes phenomena appear to be manifestations of an underlying force or quality which is the source of their oneness, like waves on the surface of the ocean. This interconnection includes the experiencer, whose sense of separateness dissolves away. As one person put it, again reporting an extra-traditional experience, 'I began to experience a clearness and connection with everything that existed, with the whole Universe that felt beyond human' (Taylor, 2017, 61). Or as another person put it, 'I was vast and merged with the universe. No longer could I perceive myself as separate, I was in and of the universe, with time and space altered' (Ibid., 54).

Timelessness also appears to be a fundamental feature. Certainly, a sense of transcending time is a common aspect of traditional mystical experiences. As Meister Eckhart put it, 'The power [of the soul] knows no yesterday or tomorrow; there is only a present Now: the happenings of a thousand years ago, and thousand years to come, are there in the present' (n Happold, 1986, 278). Similarly, Thomas Traherne described how the presence of God in the human soul created a 'spiritual room of the mind [that] is transcendent to time and place' (in Marshall, 2019, 211). In accordance with these perspectives, in an extra-traditional awakening context, one person reported that 'there was no concept of distance or past and present' (Taylor, 2017, 54). Another person stated, 'Everything became One and I was outside of time' (Ibid.).

It may also be valid to infer a fundamental all-pervading spiritual principle, perceived as an energy or force. Mystics allied to monotheistic traditions may

describe this as the radiance of God pervading the world, or an adherent to Vedanta may describe the all-pervading radiance of Brahman. In extra-taditional mystical experiences, more general language is used. In the childhood mystical experience quoted above, the experience noted how everything was ‘pulsating with life and energy, the road surface was the same...I was made up of the same pulsating energy...I lay down, looked up to the sky and then just felt the oneness of everything’ (in Taylor, 2017, 54). As this experience implies, it is this fundamental spiritual principle which brings all things into oneness. The radiance and love frequently described in mystical experiences may be seen as qualities of this fundamental principle, such as in the above experience in which ‘Everything was made of love. I was immersed in a sea of love’ (Taylor, 2018, 46).

The concept of an absolute spiritual principle is a common feature of mystical or spiritual traditions, variously conceived as *Brahman*, *Dao*, *Dharmakaya*, the Godhead, the One, *En Sof*, and so on. There are many similar conceptions from indigenous cultures too. For example, the Hopi Indians use the term *maasauu* (Heinberg, 1989), and the Lakota refer to *wakan-tanka* (literally, the ‘force which moves all things,’ Eliade, 1967), while the Ainu of Japan use the term *ramut* (Monro, 1962). The Christian missionary Reverend Stephen Riggs spent more than 40 years living with the Dakota Indians in the nineteenth century, and described their spiritual principle, *taku wakan*, as follows:

Awe and reverence are its due, and it is as unlimited in manifestation as it is in idea. All life is *Wakan*; so also is everything which exhibits power, whether in action, as the winds and drifting clouds; or in passive endurance, as the boulder by the wayside.

For even the commonest sticks and stones have a spiritual essence which must be revered as a manifestation of the all-pervading, mysterious power that fills the universe (in Griffiths, 1976, 21).

Of course, there are some significant differences in these conceptions. Brahman differs in some ways to Dao, Ein Sof, or taku wakan, and so on. For example, Brahman has a static and neutral quality which differs from the more dynamic qualities of the Dao. In Hindu Vedanta, the aim of spiritual development is to become aware of our oneness with Brahman, whereas in Daoism the aim of development is to attain harmony with the Dao in one’s life and activities—again, a more dynamic conception. In Theravada Buddhism, the concept of an all-pervading spiritual force or energy is absent altogether. There have been attempts—for example, by Murti (2013)—to interpret sunyata in such terms, but these are questionable. At the same time, the Mahayana concepts of the dharmakaya and the tathagatagarbha are certainly closer to the concept of all-pervading spiritual force.

However, there is an essential commonality in that all these terms refer to an immanent and all-pervading spiritual force or quality. Spiritual traditions’ concepts of an underlying or ultimate reality (such as *Brahman*, *Dao*, or *En Sof*) can be seen as different interpretations and conceptualizations of this fundamental

quality. They are not necessarily abstract metaphysical concepts. It is possible — probable in my view — that they are experientially rooted, deriving from mystics' direct experience of an all-pervading fundamental spiritual principle. In James's (1986) analogy, they are views from different windows.

From the standpoint of constructivism, one might argue: how does the above differ from traditional perennialism? It may appear that I am positing in Jones's terms, 'a single transcendent referent for all religions' (Jones, 2022a, 661). I accept that I am positing a fundamental universal spiritual principle which is the source of concepts such as *Brahman*, *Dao*, and *En Sof*. However, these spiritual principles are not necessarily linked to conventional concepts of God, or gods. What is the connection between the multiple deities of Hinduism and the impersonal all-pervading spirit-force of *Brahman*? What is the connection between the anthropomorphic God — conceived as existing in separation to the world but with the power to intervene in human affairs — of conventional Christianity or Islam and the dynamic all-pervading divine radiance described by mystics? Meister Eckhart separated the two by differentiating between the Godhead and God, but still saw the latter as an emanation of the former.

As suggested above, it seems more likely that conventional concepts of God (and their associated religions) can be explained in terms of psychological factors such as existential insecurity, and a desire for protection, certainty, and purpose. Again as suggested above, the fact that mystics have sometimes found themselves in conflict with conventional religious authorities suggests a clear gulf between their experiences and religious teachings, including their concepts of God.

In other words, I do not believe that the above spiritual principles form a 'single transcendent referent for religions' (Jones, 2022a, 661). However, they do constitute a commonality within the framework of contemplative, transformational traditions such as Vedanta, Sufism, Daoism, and mystical Christianity. Of course, even if the reader disputes the ontological significance of mystical experiences, the occurrence of the above themes in mystical experiences across cultures — both within and outside the context of spiritual traditions — still offers further evidence for a phenomenological perennialism.

## A New Day for Perennialism

Rose has suggested that a revised experientially oriented perennialism can constitute 'a new day for perennialism' (2016, 1) with the 'recovery of mystical essentialism' (Ibid., 4). Sawyer has also described how an 'improved understanding of the Perennial Philosophy, along with improved methods for studying mystical states of consciousness, is reopening discussion of the topic' (2021). I certainly believe that both scholars are correct, and I hope that this paper can contribute to this movement.

The traditionalist perennialism that insisted on a 'universal religion' was too simplistic, glossing over plurality in a zeal to find unanimity. But constructivists went too far in the opposite direction. Valid doubts about a common core of religious doctrine were extended to invalid claims that mystical experiences are entirely culturally constructed. These claims do not stand up to scrutiny, particularly when we

take extra-traditional mystical experiences into account. While Jones may be right to speak of ‘genuinely different mysticisms with different beliefs, practices, values, and goals’ (2022a, 659), it is important to emphasize the phenomenological commonalities in mystical experiences (both across and outside traditions) and the conceptual commonalities (such as maps of spiritual development and fundamental spiritual principles) that these shared experiential features give rise to.

I believe that there is a corrective midway point between the extremes of traditionalist perennialism and constructivism or contextualism. This mid-point is a phenomenological perennialism, a more nuanced and qualified (hence “soft”) form of perennialism which focuses on experiences rather than doctrines.

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**Conflict of Interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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