

Interfaith Dialogue and Mystical Consciousness*

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■ Abstract

This article focuses on the meeting of faith traditions—interfaith dialogue—from the perspective of mystical consciousness. In doing so, it aims to understand the dynamics and potentialities of interfaith mysticism. The contribution of this article to religious studies, in combination with theological inquiry, is threefold: first, it illuminates how the Trinity is directly experienced in interfaith contexts; second, it provides an interfaith framework that accounts for the possibilities, complexity, and challenges of interfaith encounters; third, it shows how Gavin Flood’s three orders of discourse—traditions’ experience and texts, interpretation within traditions, and academic inquiry—can be applied to the study of interfaith mysticism, employing a phenomenological emphasis on hermeneutics. The inquiry is located within the context of representatives of Hindu mystical consciousness (Sri Ramana Maharshi, Sri Aurobindo) and the Christian interfaith tradition (Henri Le Saux, Bede Griffiths, David Steindl-Rast), in conversation with Raimon Panikkar’s and Francis X. Clooney’s approaches to interreligious studies.

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■ Introduction

WE DO NOT BELONG TO THE PAST DAWNS, BUT TO THE NOONS OF THE FUTURE. A mass of new material is flowing into us; we have not only to assimilate the influences of the great theistic religions of India and of the world and a recovered sense of the meaning of Buddhism, but to take full account of the potent though limited revelations of modern knowledge and seeking; and, beyond that, the remote and dateless past which seemed to be dead is returning upon us with an effulgence of many luminous secrets long lost to the consciousness of mankind but now breaking out again from behind the veil. All this points to a new, a very rich, a very vast synthesis; a fresh and widely embracing harmonisation of our gains is both an intellectual and a spiritual necessity of the future.¹

These words of Sri Aurobindo anticipate an interreligious future—a “vast synthesis” inclusive of spiritual, intellectual, and methodological facets. To bring such a vision to fruition, he dedicated forty years, twenty-four of them in seclusion. His effort resulted in an unprecedented evolutionary synthesis of the various Hindu-Yogic paths—an Eastern harmonization open to Western philosophical insight, the concerns of Matter and Life, and theological notions such as the Trinity (corresponding to Aurobindo’s Triple Divine), all supported by his direct mystical experience. But, is it possible for an even larger synthesis, including traditions different from those born on Hindu soil, as he foretold? And more importantly, is it already happening in our day and age?

This article gives voice to a narrative within interreligious studies different from those construed by politico-historical, cultural, and philosophical scholarship, even if it interlaces with them—one that accounts for mystical experiences² and

¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* (CWSA 19; Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1997) 10, <https://www.sriarobindoashram.org/sriarobindo/writings.php>. All the works of Sri Aurobindo referenced in this article, part of the Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo (CWSA), are available on that same website.

² The reality and divine nature of the mystical experiences included in this inquiry are axiomatic. As in prior studies, I have considered: “(1) the integrity of the person describing the experience; (2) the proper contextualization of any experience from a historical-spiritual perspective . . . ; (3) the *test of will* (i.e., divine experiences cannot be reproduced or caused by one’s own will)”³; see Isaac Portilla, *The Possibilities of Spiritual Experience: An Autobiographical and Philosophical Exploration* (Madrid: Editorial Mirlo, 2017) 160–61 n. 86 (italics in original). The authority of the selected mystical sages (see n. 73) helps in taking such a position—not to question their word in regard to their experience; another matter is that of interpretation (as discussed in Part I).

existential dynamics³ within the encounter of faith traditions.⁴ To accomplish this task, it proposes a novel inquiry focused on interfaith mysticism, employing hermeneutical phenomenology⁵ in conversation with Raimon Panikkar's and Francis X. Clooney's theological approaches to interreligious studies.⁶ Interfaith mysticism brings the Trinity to the forefront of interreligious reflection, which, together with Aurobindo's deliberations, generates a robust trinitarian framework that speaks across traditions. While portraying the dynamics and potentialities of interfaith mysticism, this article also describes what religion inevitably becomes, for the interreligious⁷ encounter "belongs to the true dynamism of History."⁸

This article provides an integrative approach within the current debate on interreligious vis-à-vis interfaith studies. It builds on deliberations presented in the co-edited volume *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field* (2018),⁹ as well as Clooney's paths forward¹⁰ in *The Future of Hindu-Christian Studies* (2017)¹¹ in line with his suggestion for the direction of *Harvard Theological Review* as a "global journal for critical (inter)religious (theological) reflection" for those

³ By "existential dynamics," I understand the processes and forces that affect the perception, philosophy, and life orientation of a person. See the I-Other dynamism and hypostatic alterations in Part II.

⁴ The term "faith traditions" is emphatic on the existential dimension, to which the term faith belongs. I understand it as being inclusive of religious experience—mystical experience in particular. Panikkar notices: "Faith is a constitutive dimension of our being: an openness to the more, the unknown, transcendence, the infinite: openness to the given"; see Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lectures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010) 306.

⁵ The object of this inquiry—interfaith mysticism—requires the consideration of contextual narratives within traditions and phenomena (descriptions of mystical experiences), both open to interpretation; for this reason, the method selected for this study is hermeneutical phenomenology. See Gavin Flood, "Reflections on Tradition and Inquiry in the Study of Religions," *JAAR* 74 (2006) 47–58, at 48. See also Part I.A.

⁶ This article recognizes Panikkar's intrareligious hermeneutics and Clooney's comparative theology as providing complementary insights within interreligious studies. In comparison to theirs, the method I employ is: highly phenomenological, due to the focus on mystical experience; daring, in it is commitment to recognize (and account for) the force or impressiveness of the experiences; less comparison driven. On the other hand, it shares: their concern with theological reflection in interreligious engagement; a commitment to the in-depth study of traditions; the welcoming of challenge and growth through interreligious dialogue, recognizing that "research does not always serve faith's interests"; see Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 34. Regarding the force or impressiveness of experiences, see Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 209–16, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heh.30586>.

⁷ I have respected the term interreligious when it is the actual term used in the quotations. Panikkar and Clooney use the term interreligious for faith-based encounters.

⁸ Raymond Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1968) 12.

⁹ *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field* (ed. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman; Boston: Beacon, 2018).

¹⁰ See Part I.A.

¹¹ Francis X. Clooney, *The Future of Hindu-Christian Studies: A Theological Inquiry* (Routledge Hindu Studies Series; London: Routledge, 2017).

“sympathetically interested in faith and practice.”¹² More concretely, this inquiry shares some of the objectives proposed for interreligious studies, complementary and in relation to interfaith engagement: “(1) to analyze the character of interreligious encounter; (2) to think critically about interfaith dialogue; and (3) to historicize diversity, pluralism, and tolerance.”¹³ However, it is distinctive—different from more detached approaches within interreligious and religious studies—in that: 1) it includes theology, thus rooting the inquiry in a preexisting tradition of interreligious scholarship and practice (Panikkar, Clooney); as Deanna Ferree Womack suggests “we need not start from scratch”;¹⁴ 2) even when it offers similar counterpoints to the interfaith movement (e.g., challenging the advocacy of a flat universalism or a too-simple pluralism), it does so, not through the analysis of political power dynamics and cultural variables, but through an in-depth engagement with the mystical phenomenology of interfaith encounters. In sum, this inquiry is sensitive to matters of faith and practice, while maintaining the rigor and attention to detail of scholarly analysis.

In an effort to portray with sensitivity the object of study—interfaith mysticism—the style of this article will at times echo that of mystical writings (especially in Part II, where the existential interfaith framework is presented). This mode allows me to explore the possibility of academic inquiry working with mystical experiences and practices more organically. For example, acknowledging Wayne Proudfoot’s differentiation between evocative and descriptive predicates in the scholarly analysis of mystical experience,¹⁵ I choose to emphasize descriptions of mystical experience that are both evocative and descriptive (e.g., the Hindu experience of Brahman as all-pervading consciousness is both evocative and descriptive, while the classical formula “not-this not-that,” or *neti neti*, would be evocative, but not descriptive). Such an emphasis is important for academic reflection: it opens the door to an understanding triggered by evocative-rhetorical¹⁶ forms without the need of renouncing descriptive-analytical language. This possibility also recognizes the role of affection, emotion, and empathy in interreligious reading and scholarship.¹⁷

¹² Francis X. Clooney, “The Future of the *Harvard Theological Review* in a Global and Interreligious Age,” *HTR* 101 (2008) 339–49, at 349.

¹³ Amy L. Allocco, Geoffrey D. Claussen, and Brian K. Pennington, “Constructing Interreligious Studies: Thinking Critically about Interfaith Studies and the Interfaith Movement,” in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies* (ed. Patel et al.) 36–48, at 39.

¹⁴ Deanna Ferree Womack, “From the History of Religions to Interfaith Studies: A Theological Educator’s Exercise in Adaptation,” in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies* (ed. Patel et al.) 16–25, at 23.

¹⁵ Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 128–29.

¹⁶ G. William Barnard suggests that if rhetorical language “has the ability to evoke that awareness [of ‘the God-head,’ ‘Buddha Nature,’ ‘Atman,’ etc.] . . . then rhetorical language should be lauded”; see G. William Barnard, “Explaining the Unexplainable: Wayne Proudfoot’s *Religious Experience*,” *JAAR* 60 (1992) 231–56, at 246.

¹⁷ Francis X. Clooney, “Passionate Comparison: The Intensification of Affect in Interreligious Reading of Hindu and Christian Texts,” *HTR* 98 (2005) 367–90, at 389–90.

In the context of interfaith mysticism, “mystical experience” will be understood as the direct apprehension of Ultimate Reality, which is a well-accepted term across interfaith practitioners of different traditions (East and West).¹⁸ The demarcation and explanation of this term will come through hermeneutical phenomenology in combination with theological inquiry, not imposing a priori definitions influenced by the interests and concerns of fields such as psychology.¹⁹ Further, the historic Hindu-Christian setting chosen for this inquiry anchors mystical experience into contextual narratives inclusive of views and practices belonging to both the East and the West. In this way, two important critiques to William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)²⁰—“lack of attention to historical context,”²¹ and “self-imposed constraints”²² favoring Western views on mysticism—are taken into account in the academic study of mystical experience within interreligious studies.

The understanding of mystical consciousness²³ that I propose for this study is construed by contrasting the testimonies of recognized mystical sages (Sri Ramana Maharshi, Sri Aurobindo, Henri Le Saux, etc.). They present an ample and varied mystical phenomenology, supported by the accounts of disciples and occasional visitors and by philosophical/theological and scholarly commentaries, together with their own corpus of hermeneutical-phenomenological inquiry²⁴ often engaging with traditional/scriptural texts. Several characteristics make the type of mysticism considered for this study rich and thought-provoking for academic analysis: it is rooted in two major faith traditions (Hinduism and Christianity) in existential dialogue with each other; it was expressed with profundity in a historic period (Indian independence movement, two world wars, Vatican II) and in interaction with all facets of social life (including politics, ethics, and culture); its experiences and

¹⁸ See “The Points of Agreement” of the Snowmass Interreligious Conference in Thomas Keating’s introduction to *The Common Heart: An Experience of Interreligious Dialogue* (ed. Netanel Miles-Yepe; New York: Lantern, 2006), Kindle.

¹⁹ Ultimate Reality connects with what F. Samuel Brainerd calls “the province of philosophy” and so of theology—the understanding of mystical experiences as related to “ultimate or foundational life concerns” (“profundity” being their identifying trait)—rather than “the province of psychology and physiology” (in which case the “nonordinariness” of such experiences would be the trait); see F. Samuel Brainerd, “Defining ‘Mystical Experience,’” *JAAR* 64 (1996) 359–93, at 371–79 (emphasis added).

²⁰ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature (Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901–1902)* (London: Longmans, Green, 1902; repr., Cambridge Library Collection—Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139149822>.

²¹ *William James and a Science of Religions: Reexperiencing The Varieties of Religious Experience* (ed. Wayne Proudfoot; New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) 43, <https://doi.org/10.7312/prou13204>.

²² Ann Taves, “Religious Experience and the Divisible Self: William James (and Frederic Myers) as Theorist(s) of Religion,” *JAAR* 71 (2003) 303–26, at 306.

²³ See Part I.B.

²⁴ Brainerd Prince suggests, “Aurobindo’s integral philosophy is best understood as a hermeneutical philosophy of religion”; see Brainerd Prince, *The Integral Philosophy of Aurobindo: Hermeneutics and the Study of Religion* (Routledge Hindu Studies Series; London: Routledge, 2017) 8.

states are not isolated epiphanies but, in most cases, recurrent, demonstrable, and transferable (thus especially relevant for interfaith dialogue); further, descriptions of these experiences present consistent signifiers (e.g., consciousness, light, love, grace, power, etc.) that point to concrete transformative effects, existential functions, and life changes. Sri V. Ganesan recounts the meeting of Echammal, a grieving woman who had just lost her husband and children, with Sri Ramana:

Bhagavan [Sri Ramana] looked at her for nearly an hour. She stood in front of Bhagavan with *tears* rolling down from her eyes. He had *tears* streaming down his own face as well. Not a single word transpired between them, but she felt an immense *power*, a mysterious *force* that seemed to keep her immobilized. Miraculously, there was not a drop of sorrow left in her. She felt the *grace* and took a vow that she would feed this ascetic all her life.²⁵

This article is structured in two parts. Part I explains the relevance, terminology, and context of this inquiry. Part II explores the main characteristics of an explicitly experiential interfaith dialogue—existential interfaith—based on mystical accounts of interfaith encounters. The outcome of this hermeneutical-phenomenological and theological investigation challenges reductionist and merely functional ways of thinking about mysticism and interfaith dialogue, showing the importance of interfaith mysticism in the future of religion.

■ I. Context of Inquiry

A. Exploring an Interreligious Future

This inquiry follows Clooney's reflections in *The Future of Hindu-Christian Studies* (2017), in particular his praise of Gavin Flood's work *The Truth Within* (2013). Considered by Clooney an exemplar for the future of interreligious studies,²⁶ *The Truth Within* supports the method I employ, which, akin to Flood's, "is phenomenological because of the desire to allow what shows itself to be seen within religions, and it is hermeneutical because it recognizes the inescapably historical nature of inquiry."²⁷ Further, Clooney's inquiry into the potential future(s) of the field responds to an increasingly pressing concern: to identify sensitive ways of engaging an emerging interreligious reality,²⁸ the acknowledgment of which puts

²⁵ Sri V. Ganesan, *Ramana Periya Puranam: Inner Journey of 75 Old Devotees* (ed. Suresh Kailaash; Tiruvannamalai: Author [V. Ganesan], n.d.) 42, <https://www.aham.com/RamanaPeriyaPuranam/> (emphasis added). I use italics in quotations to emphasize terms of special phenomenological/theological relevance for this inquiry.

²⁶ Although Clooney's major concern is Hindu-Christian studies, thus fitting the Hindu-Christian context of this inquiry, I understand his suggestion goes beyond these two traditions, just as Flood's work does.

²⁷ Gavin Flood, *The Truth Within: A History of Inwardness in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 10, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199684564.001.0001>.

²⁸ Mario I. Aguilar states: "Religious diversity is not a problem but a human reality"; see Aguilar, "Dialogue, Liberation, and Justice," in *Understanding Interreligious Relations* (ed. David Cheetham,

forward two vital issues for religious studies—fairness to the religious “Other” and the impact of interfaith mysticism on the future of religion. Both issues are highly relevant for this study.

The first issue—fairness to the religious “Other”—refers to the need of letting faith traditions “speak” for themselves before any further inquiry and comparative analysis. Flood proposes the differentiation of three orders of discourse,²⁹ which facilitate an academic inquiry fair to any tradition that may be studied: the first order is represented by the tradition as it is—its experience, practice, and main texts, before any reflection, interpretation, and self-investigation; the second order—by the reflection, interpretation, and self-investigation of the tradition (e.g., theology in Christianity, or critical investigation in Hinduism); the third order—by academic inquiry, which introduces a variety of methodologies foreign to traditions, offering at times “corrective readings of traditions’ self-descriptions.” Flood’s orders prevent what Proudfoot characterized as descriptive reductions—“the failure to identify an emotion, practice, or experience under the description by which the subject [who has mystical experiences] identifies it”³⁰—at the same time guaranteeing the independence of the scholarly inquiry through explanatory reductions—explanations given by the scholar without the need of the subject’s approval (a “third-order” discourse). Also, differentiating between “first-” and “second-order” discourses recognizes Proudfoot’s observation that individuals who have mystical experiences “often revise their perceptual judgments,”³¹ yet without the need of agreeing with constructivist views. That is, mystical experiences are conversant with both a priori beliefs and post-factum readings, yet not necessarily mediated or constructed by language and culture. In this line of argumentation, Flood states: “The truth within in religions is partially constituted by the world view the practitioner inhabits. This is not a constructivist argument . . . but rather that the languages of interiority are given rise to within specific cultures that are available for self-reflective use.”³²

Clooney understands that Flood’s three orders of discourse should be part of the future of interreligious scholarship—“required for Hindu-Christian studies to be a viable field today.”³³ This article follows Clooney’s suggestion and displays Flood’s three orders of discourse in the context of interfaith mysticism. I further apply a positive hermeneutics of suspicion³⁴ in the engagement with sacred texts, mystical writings, and oral teachings of mystical sages, so as to differentiate effect-oriented

Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 306–23, at 306.

²⁹ Flood, “Reflections on Tradition,” 54–56.

³⁰ Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 196–97.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

³² Flood, *The Truth Within*, 244–45.

³³ Clooney, *Hindu-Christian Studies*, 98.

³⁴ Arvind Sharma, “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: A Case Study from Hinduism,” *HTR* 94 (2001) 353–68, at 354–57, 366–68.

teaching statements from philosophical reflections.³⁵ These three orders of discourse interact in an inquiry that attempts to speak to both Eastern and Western worlds, through a specific terminology and method respectful of the “Other.”

The second issue—the impact of interfaith mysticism on the future of religion—refers to how the encounter of traditions affects the religious understanding of a person but also shapes what religion comes to be at a collective level. Neither Flood’s work nor Clooney’s reflections explicitly assert that these types of religious studies (and the phenomena they inquire into) shape an interreligious present and future. However, if we take Flood’s thesis around inwardness seriously—1) “that the quest for inner truth in premodernity is an intensification of inwardness that is collective,” 2) “in which there is participation in a cosmos greater than the individual,” and which 3) “impacts on history through action”³⁶—and consider relevant complementary insights of the main figures of this article, it could be concluded that interfaith mysticism shapes the becoming of religion. The rationale is as follows: Panikkar gives account of the understanding that the human being is not a merely passive recipient of grace, but a “Mediator”—between the divine and the world—with great responsibility;³⁷ mystical sages, such as Sri Ramana Maharshi, Sri Aurobindo, and Le Saux (a.k.a. Abhishiktananda), take such responsibility seriously and demonstrate (as mediators) how their inner truth is an offering to the collective interior and part of a greater cosmos; Flood acknowledges both the collective and cosmological connection of inwardness (or inner truth) and further describes how “intention, imagination, and judgement,” which belong to and are shaped in the interior, translate into world exteriors as “movement” and “events that form history.”³⁸ Thus, any event of the interreligious interior, even at the individual level, becomes part of the collective interior, and also of the world exterior—interfaith mysticism affects and shapes religion. Such conclusion speaks of the ultimate importance of this research, beyond the first issue—fairness to the religious “Other.”

The understanding of “religion” in this inquiry is context-specific: it recognizes the sensitivities of the methodological interlocutors chosen for this article (Flood, Panikkar, and Clooney), as well as the importance of the object of research—interfaith mysticism. Here, Talal Asad’s warning against “a universal definition of religion” transcends the cultural-anthropological context of his reflections.³⁹ In this sense, I understand religious experience—mystical experience in particular (for its link to Ultimate Reality)—to be central to the constitution and formation of faith systems—namely, religions. For example, even if a religion as multifaced as Hinduism may find some of its explanatory coherence through a variety of

³⁵ See Ramana’s statement on the “Other” in Part II and in n. 112.

³⁶ Flood, *The Truth Within*, 28, 193, 262.

³⁷ Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being*, chs. 6 and 7, 304.

³⁸ Flood, *The Truth Within*, 262–67.

³⁹ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) 29, 54, <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.16014>.

interactions of sociopolitical interests and cultural forces,⁴⁰ I still consider mystical experience to be its central referential parameter—its guiding principle—for it provides crucial validation of the faith it represents. Indeed, my research strongly suggests that to understand the power of Hinduism, we must understand its experience, which means to understand more accurately the mystical experiences proposed by its major exponents—Sri Ramana and Sri Aurobindo.

This emphasis is not new: the search for a definition of religious experience (for recognizing its “marks”) in the early nineteenth century, later inherited by William James (1902), was motivated by the task to define religion itself,⁴¹ and it overlapped with the beginning of the modern science of religion, from the 1870s when the understanding of “world religions” seemingly began to emerge.⁴² For example, Max Müller, in his Gifford Lectures, affirmed: “Unless religion can be proven to be an experience . . . it will always lack the solid foundation on which all our knowledge rests.”⁴³ That is, the academic understanding of religion, and of the religious “Other” (not just Christianity), has been informed by (and concerned with) the study of religious experience from the beginning. This article shows the importance of mystical experience in religion—for its becoming—through an original perspective.

B. Interfaith Dialogue and Mystical Consciousness

The focus of this inquiry is the meeting of faith traditions—interfaith dialogue—from the perspective of mystical consciousness. There are some important clarifications I must make regarding my use of the terms interfaith dialogue and mystical consciousness. First, by “interfaith dialogue” I mean the encounter of faith traditions with an emphasis on mystical experience; these are meetings in being,⁴⁴ with a commitment to the existential encounter.

Such existential stance has shaped an interfaith tradition⁴⁵ formed by mystically oriented individuals, who are concurrently serious practitioners and innovative thinkers, including theologians, philosophers, and academics: Henri Le Saux, Bede Griffiths, Raimon Panikkar, David Steindl-Rast, Francis X. Clooney, and Mario I. Aguilar, among others. Thus, my research contributes to an experiential

⁴⁰ Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 3–7, 140, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195166558.001.0001>.

⁴¹ Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 156.

⁴² Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 107–9.

⁴³ F. Max Müller, *Natural Religion: The Gifford Lectures Delivered before the University of Glasgow in 1888* (London: Longmans, Green, 1889) 114, <https://archive.org/details/naturalreligion00ml>.

⁴⁴ “Being” refers to the existential dimension of life, the felt-presence of Eternity, the I AM principle through which the experience of the Trinity is possible, with all its variations/hypostatic alterations.

⁴⁵ By “interfaith tradition” I mean a stream of interfaith thought characterized by the openness and appreciation of other faiths, flourishing in a post–Vatican II context.

interfaith tradition, which has made life-committed inquiries to answer a variety of complementary research questions: if Le Saux's question would be how to live fully the Christian and Hindu experiences; Griffiths's—whether the Christian experience can be found and enhanced within the Hindu model of an ashram; Panikkar's—how to understand and celebrate the variety of faith traditions; Steindl-Rast's—what the contribution of Christianity is within a variety of complementary traditions; Clooney's—what we can learn through the comparative theological exploration of Hindu and Christian texts; Aguilar's—whether we can be witnesses of a shared humanity through the eremitic meeting with the “Other” in silence, poetry, and prayer; my question at present is what the implications and possible outcomes of a diversity of interacting traditions are, from the perspective of mystical consciousness (phenomenologically and hermeneutically acknowledged).

My approach to this question responds to Clooney's appeal to find an “integral balance” in the academic study of religions between “intellectual practice” and “matters of faith, experience, and practice.”⁴⁶ This suggestion is based on four trends of “paradigm shift” identified by José Ignacio Cabezón: weight of pluralism; challenge of believers/practitioners/insiders to academics (e.g., the East will not remain silent about how it is portrayed in Western academia); self-disclosure of scholars' religious affiliation; institutionalization of non-Western theologies.⁴⁷ Today's comparative theologies have developed a constructive resilient outlook in this context—“a recognition of intellectual and spiritual possibilities that is not thwarted by the fact of differences”⁴⁸—a feature inspiring this article's approach. James Fredericks's work, for example, grounded in friendships and interpersonal inquiry⁴⁹ is relevant to Cabezón's points and complementary to Clooney's textual emphasis⁵⁰ and this article's interfaith framework (Part II). The acknowledgment of such a paradigm shift leads to (and connects with) the second necessary clarification of my research question—the term mystical consciousness, which provides an experiential basis for East-West/Hindu-Christian dialogue.

In the context of this inquiry, by “mystical consciousness”⁵¹ I mean any state of existential awareness consequence of the direct experience of God, the Divine,

⁴⁶ Clooney, *Hindu-Christian Studies*, 99–101.

⁴⁷ José Ignacio Cabezón, “The Discipline and Its Other: The Dialectic of Alterity in the Study of Religion,” *JAAR* 74 (2006) 21–38, at 34.

⁴⁸ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 31.

⁴⁹ James L. Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Faith Meets Faith: An Orbis Series in Interreligious Dialogue; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=1880948&site=ehost-live; Interreligious Friendship after Nostra Aetate> (ed. James L. Fredericks and Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier; Interreligious Studies in Theory and Practice; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137472113>.

⁵⁰ Francis X. Clooney, *Reading the Hindu and Christian Classics: Why and How Deep Learning Still Matters* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019), Kindle; idem, *Comparative Theology*, 49.

⁵¹ The term mystic/al consciousness has been used by James in his Gifford Lectures in 1902,

Spirit, or Ultimate Reality, acknowledging its triadic structure. Hence, in order to qualify for this inquiry (for the existential interfaith it suggests), there is the need of an awareness (at least a certain intuition or apprehension) of the three hypostases of the Trinity—1) the Universal Spirit, Father, or Absolute, as all-pervading consciousness, 2) the Personal Spirit, Christ, or Light of being, and 3) the Spirit Force, Holy Spirit, or Divine Power—in greater or lesser degrees of experiential depth, and through different possible aggregates.

Here, Sri Aurobindo's own understanding of mystical consciousness, which he compared with the Trinity and termed the Triple Divine, provides an important Hindu reference, including these three aspects:

1. It is the Cosmic Self and Spirit that is in and behind all things and beings ['the Father']. . . . 2. It is the Spirit and Master of our own being within us ['the Christos in men'] . . . so that we may grow out of the Ignorance into the Light. 3. The Divine is transcendent Being and Spirit, all bliss and light and divine knowledge and power ['the Holy Ghost'], . . . we have to rise and bring down the reality of it more and more into our consciousness and life.⁵²

All the phenomenological aspects of mystical consciousness are direct experiences for Sri Ramana and Sri Aurobindo; further, they manifest in encounters with them, hence the relevance of these Hindu sages for interfaith mysticism. The juxtaposition of three testimonies from individuals with very different backgrounds—a skeptic/atheist, a Hindu saint, and a devout Christian—describing their encounters with Sri Ramana is significant:

The darkness in me . . . gradually lightened and melted into a *glow within*. My erstwhile sadness disappeared completely leaving in my Heart an inexplicable *joy*. My limbs appeared to be washed in an ocean tide of *freedom*. . . . I saw the foolishness and futility of turning my gaze on the dark side of the life. —Chaganlal V. Yogi

I found in the glance of the Maharshi, the sizzling *brilliance* of the sun. My breath seemed to stop and my mind was elevated into some spiritual realm of unutterable *peace* and *happiness*. —Swami Madhavtirtha

The mere sight of him made me tremble all over. . . . As I gazed at Bhagavan, I felt I saw God himself sitting there. I felt I was seeing that early morning, a blazing *light* that had taken human form. It was more *radiant* than anything I had ever seen before. . . . Waves of *ecstasy* inundated me. —Wolter Keers⁵³

by S. K. Maitra, and more recently by Bernard McGinn. See James, *The Varieties*; Susil Kumar Maitra, *The Meeting of The East and The West in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1956); Bernard McGinn, "Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 8 (2008) 44–63.

⁵² Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga I* (CWSA 28; Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2012) 7–8, 376–77.

⁵³ Ganesan, *Ramana Periya Puranam*, 306–11, 455 (emphasis added).

The meetings with Sri Aurobindo are equally noteworthy. Sri Kodandarama Rao, an occasional student of Sri Aurobindo, describing a number of his experiences, states:

As I sat before the Master for meditation, the whole being used to become numb as his *Force* began to work in me and fill my nerves with *light* and *force*. I felt as if he was *transmitting* his divine *Force* and *Light* into me. In his presence, the *Force* was felt intensely and it began to work in the body day and night and was *omnipresent*.⁵⁴

A hermeneutical-phenomenological analysis of testimonies reveals that the different aspects of mystical consciousness are recurring (constant in the case of states of consciousness), transferable, and prompt to amplification in encounters. Also, there is a certain correlation between perceptions of mystical phenomena, effects/feelings, and existential functions in regards to each of the hypostases; here, in order: 1) perception of all-pervading consciousness, effect/feeling of transcendence, peace function; 2) light perceptions, effect/feeling of radiance or glow within, harmony/purification function; 3) perceptions of energy, force, or power (e.g., descent, ascent), effect/feeling of presence, bliss/joy/happiness, and grace and divine love, transformation function.

C. Reflections on the Trinity

The Trinity has played a significant role in the Christian engagement with other religions, Hinduism in particular.⁵⁵ Past examples of a Hindu counterpart include: the Trimurti (Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva), by early missionaries; inquiries from the perspective of natural observation; more successfully the *Sat-Cit-Ananda* formulae, initially suggested as (the) True-Good-Beautiful (Keshab Chunder Sen), later as Being-Intelligence-Bliss (Brahmabandhab Upadhyay), or in comparison with (Divine) Being-Wisdom-Love (Merwin-Marie Snell). Closer to mystical experience, and so to a phenomenological account of the Trinity, *Sat-Cit-Ananda* was embraced by the interfaith pioneers Jules Monchanin, Le Saux, and Griffiths. More recently, David Bentley Hart, developing his own reading of it, affirms precisely “These three words are not only a metaphysical explanation of God [across ‘many traditions’], but also a *phenomenological explanation* of the human encounter with God.”⁵⁶ Clooney has pointed to both “possibilities and drawbacks” and to a “fruitful yet ambiguous role of reflection on the Trinity in the Indian context.”

⁵⁴ T. Kodandarama Rao, *At the Feet of the Master: Reminiscences* (2nd ed.; Puducherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2007) 32 (emphasis added).

⁵⁵ Francis X. Clooney, “Trinity and Hinduism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity* (ed. Peter C. Phan; Cambridge Companions to Religion; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 309–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521877398>. Most of the information in this paragraph is based on Clooney’s analysis.

⁵⁶ David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), Kindle, ch. 1 (emphasis added).

Mystical consciousness, as outlined in this article, presents an original alternative for trinitarian interreligious reflection: due to its phenomenological emphasis, it is the product of (bottom-up) contrastive inquiry within interfaith mysticism. It thus echoes Karl Rahner's "from below" trinitarian theology—"starting from a posteriori experience one asks about the a priori condition of possibility for such an experience"⁵⁷—yet emerging within an interfaith context. In doing so, it establishes a phenomenological-trinitarian foundation for theological inquiry that addresses simultaneously Christian concerns—the connection of theology (*theologia*) and economy (*oikonomia*)—and religious diversity.⁵⁸ The incipient triadic structure is further strengthened through its correspondence with the Hindu counterpart—Aurobindo's⁵⁹ Triple Divine (above). Sri Aurobindo's analysis, the product of a close-enough hermeneutics, gives support to mystical consciousness as providing a trinitarian framework that can work across traditions.

This article's approach can also be of significance to a theology of religions' inquiries and concerns. Within Catholic theology, Gavin D'Costa makes the point that the post-Vatican II position "is highly trinitarian and allows for the active sanctifying role of the Holy Spirit to be present within other religions that cannot be predicted by the church," and further, "in being open and attentive to the Holy Spirit, it [the church] grows in its own relationship to God and those from other religions";⁶⁰ such a position in the face of unknowns links well with the patient (bottom-up) phenomenological inquiry on the realities of religious diversity that this article submits. From a different angle, S. Mark Heim⁶¹ suggests, "The actual ends that various religious traditions offer as alternative human fulfillments diverge because they realize different relations with God. It is God's reality as Trinity that generates the multiplicity of dimensions that allow for that variety of relations";⁶² Brother David Steindl-Rast's testimony on the operations of the Trinity in a Buddhist

⁵⁷ Peter C. Phan, "Mystery of Grace and Salvation: Karl Rahner's Theology of the Trinity," in *Companion to the Trinity* (ed. Phan), 192–207, at 194, 205.

⁵⁸ See Fredericks's inquiry from a Buddhist-Christian perspective in James L. Fredericks, "Primordial Vow: Reflections on the Holy Trinity in Light of Dialogue with Pure Land Buddhism," *Companion to the Trinity* (ed. Phan) 325–43.

⁵⁹ Although Aurobindo grew increasingly critical of Hinduism's popular expressions, his condition of avatarhood (n. 73), his life-long hermeneutics with Hindu texts, and his ashram-life model make of him an embodiment of the Hindu faith system—in a mystical sense, following this article's understanding of religion. See Peter Heehs, "Sri Aurobindo and Hinduism," *AntiMatters* 2 (2008) 33–45, <https://antimatters2.wordpress.com/volume-2-issue-2/>.

⁶⁰ Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000) 12, 130, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567660435>.

⁶¹ Heim has developed a distinctive trinitarian "Christian theology of religious ends"; see S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), Kindle; idem, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Faith Meets Faith: An Orbis Series in Interreligious Dialogue; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

⁶² Heim, *Depth of the Riches*, ch. 5.

context (as other examples of hypostatic emphases/alterations in Part II) could point in that direction.

Further, hermeneutical phenomenology applied to interfaith mysticism may awaken soteriological questions from a theology of religions perspective. Testimonies such as those of Echammal (release from sorrow), Chaganlal V. Yogi (freedom from darkness), Wolter Keers (seeing “God himself,” a Christian affirmation) in encounters with Sri Ramana seem to attest to the possibility of Hinduism displaying salvific phenomenology.⁶³ Another question is whether Hinduism/Hindu traditions could be considered “*per se*, vehicles of salvation”⁶⁴ from a doctrinal standpoint. Similarly, Aurobindo’s work seems to involve a higher/more complete participation in the Trinity—“by enhancement”⁶⁵—in comparison with classical Hindu ends.⁶⁶ Such a work anticipates outcomes aligned with divinization (*theosis*), hence, with “one dimension of salvation”⁶⁷ in line with the Eastern Orthodox tradition. These and other questions speak strongly of interfaith mysticism as an ecumenical force,⁶⁸ opening a number of avenues for further inquiry.

Interfaith mysticism deepens interfaith dialogue, making obvious the need for openness and flexibility in theological/philosophical frameworks—to account for what is phenomenologically disclosed in these encounters. Certainly, the interfaith pioneers (Le Saux, Griffiths, Panikkar) changed their views on the Trinity as their experience matured.⁶⁹ This article’s trinitarian framework, however, does not necessarily portray the views of any of the referenced interfaith practitioners and theologians/scholars; the methodological commitment is to emphasize the phenomenology of interfaith mysticism. To conclude, considering mystical consciousness within interfaith dialogue contributes to the reemergence of trinitarian reflection on various fronts: within religious diversity, human transformation, and cross-disciplinary inquiry. Richard Rohr has similarly noticed—phenomenologically, dialectically (in the engagement with other traditions and even

⁶³ Ramana replied affirmatively when asked if Christian salvation worked through a “similar Grace”; see Sri Ramana Maharshi, *Talks with Ramana Maharshi: On Realizing Abiding Peace and Happiness* (2nd ed.; Carlsbad, CA: InnerDirections, 2001) 185.

⁶⁴ D’Costa, *The Meeting of Religions*, 102 (italics in original).

⁶⁵ Heim, *Depth of the Riches*, ch. 5.

⁶⁶ A higher “Sachchidananda” consciousness through the descent and intermediation of the Supermind. See DIAGRAMS, c. 1931 in Sri Aurobindo, *Record of Yoga* (CWSA 10 and 11; Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2001) 1359–60.

⁶⁷ Heim, *Depth of the Riches*, ch. 2.

⁶⁸ In an intra-Christian sense and in dialogue with the interreligious encounter.

⁶⁹ Edward T. Ulrich, “Swami Abhishiktananda and Comparative Theology,” *Horizons* 31 (2004) 40–63; Bede Griffiths, *The Golden String: An Autobiography* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1980) 171–72; idem, *Return to the Center* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1977) 137–46; Raimon Panikkar, *The Water of the Drop: Fragments from Panikkar’s Diaries* (ed. Milena Carrara Pavan; Delhi: ISPCK, 2018).

with science), and theologically—the rediscovery of the Trinity is “important and timely at this very moment in history.”⁷⁰

D. The Hindu-Christian Context

In the following sections, I use insights and episodes occurring in Sri Ramana’s and Sri Aurobindo’s lives and the lives of Christian interfaith pioneers to provide an interfaith framework that can be applied in settings not necessarily confined to the Hindu and Christian traditions. India is the main contextual ground of this inquiry, the place where Christian monastics found new ways of engaging in dialogue with Hinduism, living in ashrams of their own making and adopting the Hindu model of renunciation. Aguilar describes the situation as follows: “Le Saux started wearing the *kāvi*, the robes of a *sannyāsi*, a Hindu holy man. To their surprise, their bishop authorized this practice for the first time in India, and Le Saux started going around barefooted and without a clerical hat.”⁷¹ This particular period of the Hindu-Christian encounter is of crucial importance for this article, for it saw the birth of a new interfaith dialogue based on mystical experience never explored before with such an openness.⁷² Further, it triggered mystical phenomenology of yet unparalleled richness, through the encounter of Christian mystics with Hindu avatars⁷³—Sri Ramana and Sri Aurobindo. Nonetheless, the realizations of Ramana and Aurobindo (later leading to their iconic status and wide recognition) were not innate; they both had to follow their long and challenging paths.

Sri Aurobindo started his Yogic practice when he was about thirty-three, experimenting with breathing techniques for energy stimulation (*prāṇāyāma*). Three years later he received initiation into methods aimed to quiet the mind from Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, a yogi who Aurobindo felt to be up to the task; it led to his realization of the static Brahman (i.e., classical Self-realization or Nirvanic experience) and to that of the dynamic Brahman shortly after. In 1910 he left his political activities, in particular his involvement in the Indian independence movement, and moved permanently to Pondicherry. There he began an intense

⁷⁰ Richard Rohr and Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (London: SPCK, 2016) 121.

⁷¹ Mario I. Aguilar, *Christian Ashrams, Hindu Caves and Sacred Rivers: Christian-Hindu Monastic Dialogue in India 1950–1993* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2016), e-book, ch. 2, <https://www.vlebooks.com/> (italics in original).

⁷² Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 38–39.

⁷³ From a phenomenological-hermeneutical perspective, Ramana is an avatar of Shiva (the Clear Light); Aurobindo is an avatar of Vishnu/Krishna (the white-blue Overmind). The condition of avatarhood is supported by a variety of phenomenological testimonies of divine descent recorded in a vast literature. For example, Sanskrit scholar Ganapati Muni “saw an effulgence from the sky descending into Maharshi Ramana six times”; see Sri Vasishtha Ganapati Muni and Sri T. V. Kapali Sastriar, *Sri Ramana Gita* (trans. S. Sankaranarayanan; Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 2006) 29. Kodandarama Rao, a student of Aurobindo, recounts: “The Master now showered on me some of the experiences of the Gita and the Veda . . . , the cosmic vision of the Divine. . . . I felt that he was a divine incarnation”; see Rao, *Feet of the Master*, 31–32.

forty-year personal Yogic program, including goals such as developing equanimity (*samatā*), the stabilization of existential peace (*śānti*), or attaining divine delight (*kāma*) and bliss (*ānanda*).⁷⁴ Through the use of attention, intuition, awareness, holding to Divine Power, and inquiry, Sri Aurobindo's practice aimed at the embodiment of an unprecedented type of divine cognition, to be attained in three phases (through a "triple transformation"):⁷⁵ first, preparation of the psychic being or soul function; second, the Overmind phase, producing divine awareness at the mind and vital levels (accomplished in 1926, prompting his moving into seclusion and a reformulation of some aspects of his yoga); and third, the Supermind phase, producing the divine transformation of the physical body (a work-in-progress until the end of his life). Significant to the overall Yogic process—the descent of "a higher Light" and "Force" toward the stabilization of "supramental Consciousness"—was the transformation of "Matter" and the understanding of its very nature both as "Sachchidananda" and "Brahman."⁷⁶ All of it implied "a beginning, not a completion . . . the foundation of a new consciousness on earth"; in Aurobindo's view, neither the Vedic rishis nor traditional yogis, not even prior avatars (Krishna) had attempted something similar.⁷⁷ These practices were personal, though; to others, he presented an Integral Yoga, fruit of his inquiry and realizations, not imposing any strict program or method⁷⁸—"All life is a Yoga" is an often-quoted summary statement of his.⁷⁹

Sri Ramana's path was significantly different. When he was only eleven years old, he began to experience spontaneous states of Yogic absorption (*samādhi*) during sleep. One year later, in 1892, his father died. This event prompted the beginning of his inquiry into the sense of self—"I"—and its relationship with death. Three years later, he started reading a book on the lives of Shaivite saints—the Periyapurānam (besides the Bible, the only religious book he would read before his Self-realization); he also came to hear of Arunachala, a sacred hill in Tiruvannamalai regarded as the embodiment of Shiva, which made an enormous impact on him. These two early imprints—inquiry into the "I," or self, and Arunachala hill—were to become the foundation of Ramana's path. In 1896, at the age of sixteen, it was through self-inquiry that he experienced his transcendental awakening: "The body dies but the Spirit that transcends it cannot be touched by death. That means I am the deathless Spirit," he concluded. Only six weeks later, he traveled to Arunachala hill (his own

⁷⁴ Aurobindo, *Record of Yoga*, 1485–90.

⁷⁵ Portilla, *Spiritual Experience*, 93 n. 50; Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (CWSA 21 and 22; Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2005) 924.

⁷⁶ Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 924, 253.

⁷⁷ Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga I*, 288; idem, *Letters on Yoga II* (CWSA 29; Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2013) 376, 407; idem, *Letters on Himself and the Ashram* (CWSA 35; Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2011) 279–86.

⁷⁸ Rao, *Feet of the Master*, 14–15.

⁷⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga* (CWSA 23 and 24; Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1999) 47.

“guru,” as he understood it) and stayed there for the rest of his life. Sri Ramana spent his early post-awakening years in contemplative absorption, almost oblivious of his body. In 1902 he gave his first instruction on self-inquiry (published with the title *Who Am I?* or *Nan Yar?*), and in 1907, he was given the name Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi by a Sanskrit scholar and yogi who became his devotee. A community formed around him, as he bestowed the “graces” of his silent presence and replied to the questions of visitors and devotees, bringing attention to his preferred method for God-realization—self-inquiry (*ātma-vichāra*)—until the end of his life, in 1950 (the same year of Sri Aurobindo’s passing).⁸⁰

We may say that Sri Ramana’s path and philosophy focused on Self-realization, while Sri Aurobindo’s emphasis was on divine transformation. For this reason, while being highly respectful of each other’s paths and mystical experiences, they could also be suspicious of each other’s mystical philosophies; for example, when Ramana is asked about Aurobindo’s suggestion that Self-realization (the main goal of Ramana’s yoga) needs further development, he replies: “Let us first realise [the Self] and then see”; likewise, Aurobindo, having praised Ramana, later, in regard to some disagreements with him, states: “Because he is a great man, does it follow that everything he thinks or says is right?”⁸¹ These examples show how, even for the subjects of this study, who represent high levels of Hindu mystical experience, there is a distinction between the authority of the experience and that of interpretation, opinion, and overall mystical knowledge.

Sri Ramana and Sri Aurobindo were very influential for the Christian interfaith tradition that was brought to new heights in India. Ramana had an enormous impact on Benedictine Henri Le Saux, who felt the urge to pursue the truth of the Hindu-Advaitic path (non-dual consciousness) soon after meeting him. Le Saux ends the account of an experience he had following their meeting thus: “It was a call which pierced through everything, rent it in pieces and opened a mighty abyss.”⁸² (Such an account testifies to how Ramana’s presence could trigger the type of existential dynamics that are the object of my research.) Likewise, Aurobindo had a great influence on Benedictine Bede Griffiths.⁸³ In particular, Aurobindo’s work toward the transformation of the body and his understanding of the divinization of “Matter”⁸⁴ seem to have translated into Griffiths’s thoughts regarding the

⁸⁰ A. R. Natarajan, *Timeless in Time: Sri Ramana Maharshi* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006) 6–14; *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi* (ed. Arthur Osborne; Boston: Weiser, 1997) 7–13; *Be As You Are: The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi* (ed. David Godman; London: Penguin, 1992); Sri Ramana Maharshi, *Who Am I?* (Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 2010) 3–8, https://www.sriramanamaharshi.org/resource_centre/publications/; Ganesan, *Ramana Periya Puranam*, 50.

⁸¹ *The Power of the Presence: Transforming Encounters with Sri Ramana Maharshi* (ed. David Godman; 3 vols.; Boulder: Avadhuta Foundation, 2005) 1:246–49.

⁸² Abhishiktānanda, *The Secret of Arunāchala: A Christian Hermit on Shiva’s Holy Mountain* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1979) 8–9.

⁸³ Bede Griffiths and K. D. Sethna, *A Follower of Christ and a Disciple of Sri Aurobindo* (2nd ed.; Pondicherry: Clear Ray Trust, 2004).

⁸⁴ See, for example, Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, bk. 1, chs. 24 to 27.

Resurrection. Griffiths states: “In him [Sri Aurobindo] the values of being and becoming, of spirit and matter, . . . of the personal God and the absolute God-head, are integrated in a vision of the whole, which has never been surpassed.”⁸⁵

Through the following inquiry, I introduce the category of existential interfaith characterizing a deliberately mystical-experiential perspective, which accounts for mystical narratives and existential dynamics occurring within interfaith encounters. This step further in interreligious scholarship—an emphasis on the experiential nuances of mysticism and interfaith dialogue—is possible through the strong phenomenology of my inquiry and the wide range of mystical experiences that the Hindu-Christian context chosen for this article facilitates.

■ II. Existential Interfaith

A. First Characteristic: Meeting in Being

The existential interfaith encounter—akin to the encounter among sages—first and foremost is an encounter in the realm of being. To meet in being implies truly accepting the presence of the “Other,” knowing that any a priori judgment, presumption, or projection on the “Other” may veil the mystical reality they represent and reveal. Indeed, the phenomenology of interfaith mysticism testifies to Martin Buber’s understanding that “in each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou*,” and more specifically: “Every particular *Thou* is a glimpse through to the eternal *Thou*; by means of every particular *Thou* the primary word [*I-Thou*] addresses the eternal *Thou*.”⁸⁶ Hence, the “Other” in interfaith mysticism is better left as not-defined-yet, for defining leads to objectification—the separation of the human we meet from the subjectivity (and the mystical reality) in which we meet and dialogue. As Panikkar states: “The dialogue maintains the constitutive polarity of reality that cannot be split into subject and object without the previous awareness of different subjects speaking.”⁸⁷ Such an awareness—much in line with Buber’s thought, “The *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* makes its appearance as a person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity”⁸⁸—awakens the I-Other dynamism that is central to interfaith mysticism.

Defining the “Other” must be left to the encounter, not only because of the possible pernicious effects of a priori judgments for mystical revelation but because the true difference with the “Other” is transcendental; Emmanuel Levinas states: “Differences between the Other and me do not depend on different ‘properties’ . . . , nor on different psychological dispositions. . . . They are due to the I-Other conjuncture, to the inevitable *orientation* of being ‘starting from oneself’ toward

⁸⁵ Griffiths, *Return to the Center*, 137.

⁸⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (trans. Ronald Gregor Smith; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937) 6, 75 (italics in original).

⁸⁷ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (rev. ed.; New York: Paulist, 1999) 36–37.

⁸⁸ Buber, *I and Thou*, 62–65 (italics in original).

‘the Other.’ . . . *The face* teaches the *infinity* from which this insular sufficiency is separated.⁸⁹ Indeed, interfaith mysticism awakens I-Other existential dynamics that challenge the idea of a separate self or isolated personhood, through the realization of the “the Infinite”—“the ‘more’ which devastates and awakens the ‘less,’” so as to reveal love.⁹⁰ As the encounters with Sri Ramana and Sri Aurobindo portray, the “challenge of consciousness”⁹¹ by the face and presence of the “Other” reveals the divine nature of both the “I” (“first subject”) and the “Other” to-and-within each other. In these encounters there is a mechanism of reciprocity, producing empathy (the tears streaming down Sri Ramana’s face in his encounter with Echammal reminds us of it), and a range of I-Other mystical experiences and existential dynamics that are not possible through solitary mysticism.

Thus, through the consideration of the mystical phenomenology of interfaith encounters, inwardness becomes not “counter to the Levinasian move,” as Flood suggests while focusing on classical interiority,⁹² but in line with it: interfaith mysticism reveals the importance and need of exteriority—“in a face to face that is no longer entirely vision, but goes further than vision”⁹³—without the need of relinquishing interiority (what Flood speaks about). A Levinasian reading of the interfaith encounter allows us to reflect on its internal mechanisms: 1) there is an asymmetry of the interpersonal in the I-Other encounter (i.e., it is not a “flat” meeting with the same, but always challenges us); 2) the asymmetry produces a “curvature of intersubjective space,” activating existential dynamics (e.g., mystical transmission, the hypostatic alterations described in the following section); 3) such “curvature . . . is perhaps, the very presence of God,” as validated by the revelation of the Light of being and love in the mystical encounter with the “Other,” through 4) an inner mechanism—“the reversion, so to speak, of convexity into concavity”—contrary to self-protection or isolation.⁹⁴ Levinas’s thesis describes well the I-Other dynamism of the existential interfaith encounter, and if Gianni Vattimo’s reading is right in that Levinas “prefigures an end of metaphysics and of philosophy itself as the transition to religious experience,”⁹⁵ such possibility becomes explicit in the context of interfaith mysticism.

The interfaith meeting in being implies an encounter in the unknown. The “Other,” then, is a companion and co-explorer of an intriguing and exciting space in which different traditions come to pursue understanding, enrichment, and expression

⁸⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (trans. Alphonso Lingis; Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005) 215 (italics in original), 216 (emphasis added).

⁹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* (ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 139, 142.

⁹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other* (trans. Nidra Poller; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006) 32–33.

⁹² Flood, *The Truth Within*, 4.

⁹³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 290–91.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 215–16, 289–91.

⁹⁵ Gianni Vattimo, *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy* (trans. Robert T. Valgenti; New York: Columbia University Press, 2016) 134, <https://doi.org/10.7312/vatt16696>.

past the confinements of old—beyond the safety of a community that agrees in philosophy and practice. Panikkar found it impossible that a “true encounter” among faith traditions could take place through an exchange of doctrine or a comparison of beliefs. The encounter, he realized, could only happen at a most fundamental—existential—level.⁹⁶ That is the way Sri Ramana and Sri Aurobindo met any other visitor—primarily in silent presence (even though conversation and inquiry certainly had a place)—and how Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda) embraced the Hindu-Christian experience—through a purely experiential approach he considered to be beyond missionary theology.⁹⁷ Realizing the primacy of the existential dimension, Panikkar introduced two of his most revolutionary propositions: 1) that the true meeting among traditions ought to be “in Christ” (implying a Christianized “Lord” or “Īśvara” for the Hindu);⁹⁸ 2) that such meeting should be without questioning one’s own convictions and beliefs (leaving aside, however, a priori judgments on the “Other”). Thus, he advised discarding the use of the phenomenological reduction (Husserl’s *epochē*) in the interfaith encounter, in response to its advocacy as a solution to the prevailing paternalistic attitude in interfaith encounters at the time.⁹⁹ For such a proposal to be effective, he had to “de-Christianize”¹⁰⁰ Christ and make it universal, both for the Christian and the Hindu (thus for any other believer). That is, he had to go back to the origin of words and symbols to find a way forward (the third major characteristic of existential interfaith, as we shall see). Although Panikkar’s proposal of a meeting in Christ is strong from a pastoral viewpoint—it inspires the meditation on the interfaith meeting as an encounter “in the heart of the two *bona fide* partners”¹⁰¹—and effective from a mystical-theological perspective (after all, he was both a mystic and a theologian himself¹⁰²), it needs to be reframed and further developed to be part of the phenomenologically descriptive and mystical-existential approach I am presenting.

Once we enter the domain of pure experience and report from that perspective, we cannot meet fully in Christ from the beginning (i.e., in absolute phenomenological terms), because the spiritual luminosity of a person (i.e., the luminous powers of the Logos that are reflected through the personality) only manifests when there

⁹⁶ Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, 5.

⁹⁷ Shirley du Boulay, *The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005) 97.

⁹⁸ Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, 24–27.

⁹⁹ Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue*, 73–81.

¹⁰⁰ “Christ does not belong to Christianity, he only belongs to God”; see Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, 20.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 24 (italics in original).

¹⁰² Mario I. Aguilar, “The Monk in Raimon Panikkar: Silence, Pilgrimage, and a Christian-Hindu Dialogue,” *Dilatato Corde* 5 (2015), https://dimmid.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7B66659E83-94CC-45BC-88C1-2628C262711B%7D; *idem*, “Intra-Religious Dialogue and Silence in the Life of Raimon Panikkar,” *Dilatato Corde* 8 (2018), https://dimmid.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7B256B094D-B961-40AB-9DA5-615DBFC1ACC0%7D; Panikkar, *Water of the Drop*.

is an increase of coherence in one's own being—darkness and ignorance must be progressively freed, so that coherence increases and the inherent Light of being is manifested.¹⁰³ Further, as reported by individuals who have attained God-realization, the Light of being expresses differently at different times: first, it is not constant in intensity; second, its characteristics (e.g., its bright-whited colors, soul impressions, effects on being, and existential function) may differ from one manifestation to another. For example, Sri Aurobindo manifested white, bluish, and golden lights, corresponding to the Overmind (white-blue Agape) and Supermind (white-golden Ananda), with a function of sustenance and blissful evolution;¹⁰⁴ Sri Ramana manifested predominantly clear white light, corresponding to the effulgence of the peaceful transcendent reality, with a function of stabilization in the Absolute (Brahman). However, these manifestations were not permanent but occasional, and exceptionally powerful during events prepared for the spiritual contemplation of their personality (*darśana*).

It happens likewise in the existential encounter of two individuals, through shared being and mutual contemplation: there is a process in the encounter, with degrees of mutually recognized luminosity that are temporarily achieved; but there is the need of maturity and reciprocity, because, just as Panikkar says, the interfaith encounter implies an intrareligious dialogue within one's self, and such dialogue requires time for its fruition. To meet in Christ, in an absolute way, would mean to meet in spiritually transfigured bodies, similarly to Christ Jesus when he manifested himself to three of the apostles. To meet in such a way is possible; it happened, for example, in the meeting of Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda) and his foremost disciple, Marc Chaduc, who testified about his master as being “in his blinding glory, transfigured in the Light.”¹⁰⁵ However, it is not the norm; but it is the factual promise of a future divine existence to be actualized once and again in shared contemplation.

There is only one hypostasis in which a full meeting is possible, from the beginning, in a consistent manner—the First Hypostasis, the Absolute, the Universal Spirit. It is the impersonal transcendent or cosmic spirit the one hypostasis that is the “common denominator” across traditions—the ground of being shared by all. Further, it can be apprehended in a permanent and steady manner, something which is not possible with the other two hypostases. Here is where Sri Ramana's take on the “Other” can be understood through a positive hermeneutics of suspicion: to say that there are no others, that “When others are seen, that is ignorance,”¹⁰⁶ is not a philosophical reflection on the dynamics of the I-Other conjuncture, nor a description of mystical light transmission, but the affirmation of the Absolute as

¹⁰³ This principle follows Lk 11:36, taken as a mystical-phenomenological description.

¹⁰⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga III* (CWSA 30; Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2014) 128–30.

¹⁰⁵ Odette Baumer-Despeigne, “The Spiritual Way of Henri Le Saux, Swami Abhishiktananda,” *La Vie Spirituelle* 691 (1990) 22, qtd. in du Boulay, *Cave of the Heart*, 224.

¹⁰⁶ *Power of the Presence* (ed. Godman), 1:245.

universal self and all-pervading consciousness—the meeting place that represents the existential positioning of his Jnana Yoga.

Therefore, existential interfaith begins with a meeting in the Absolute, the fatherly Source, while in a juncture when Silence (*mauna*), contemplation, and the existential apprehension of Ultimate Reality are central. Then, it proceeds toward a luminous encounter, as the Christ Light begins to manifest in and among those involved in the interfaith encounter. Finally, it enters the full dynamics of the encounter, as Divine Love (Agape) becomes more and more recognized, just as the Trinity proceeds—Father, Son, Spirit. Nevertheless, even if existential interfaith initially progresses in this step-like manner, all hypostases tend to be experientially present, to some degree, at any of these steps. Further, once the awareness of the Trinity is established, a new phase opens in which there is no place for such discussion, as all the hypostases are present at any meeting. Thus, existential interfaith, from a phenomenological perspective, does not account for a meeting “in Christ” (only or foremost), but in the Trinity, because it is a triple structure of the divine that accounts for the totality of mystical phenomena testified in interfaith encounters.

The complementary difference with Panikkar’s assertion of the necessity of a meeting in Christ lies in a different approach to mystical hermeneutics. Panikkar explains how through Christ we know mystically the Father fully (even when a prior apprehension of the Father, as I suggested, is possible and necessary);¹⁰⁷ I describe how knowing the Father (the Absolute) is possible without knowing Christ, even if not fully (i.e., not in a fully embodied manner), and how gradations of a meeting in Christ occur. Indeed, awakenings to the Absolute, and thus meetings in the Absolute, are possible without a conscious revelation of the Light of being (much less of a Christ-like transfiguration). It is only among counted individuals that first meetings have a powerful luminescence, and love is patent from the start. It is equally true that striking initial meetings do not need to result in the most profound long-term spiritual relationships (i.e., those which facilitate higher mystical phenomenology); these types of relationships (e.g., the classical master-disciple) are rare and need time for maturing.

Therefore, even if some encounters end up being truly in Christ, as Panikkar suggests, a mystical-phenomenological analysis shows that there are factual gradations in them. And so, I postulate an approach that reflects mystical processes and phenomenological events in recurring encounters, which informs and complements theological inquiry (and so theological statements such as Panikkar’s). Here, Clooney’s proposal of a “shared/third space”¹⁰⁸ could function well within an interfaith context open to phenomenological observations. Such a shared/third space would reflect the dynamics of the encounter (e.g., the gradations of luminosity or apprehension of Christ), including common aspects (such as the Absolute) and

¹⁰⁷ Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004) 133.

¹⁰⁸ Clooney, *Hindu-Christian Studies*, 9–12.

differentiating elements as well (e.g., different luminosities, energetic patterns, and experiential-philosophical insights), thus acknowledging the many faces and challenges that interfaith mysticism brings about.

B. Second Characteristic: Experiential Inquiry

Once a meeting in being is possible, mystical experience becomes the focus of a rich and often complex dialogue that never departs from being. The subsequent questions are not centered on what the “Other(s)” believe but on what they experientially know, what they are, and the truths that they represent. An existential meeting often reveals the divine better than isolated practice, because, using Panikkar’s terms: “Man”¹⁰⁹ is the “Mediator” (*pontifex maximus*) between the world and the divine. Thus, an interfaith meeting is a meeting of “Man”—both the celebration and the summit of the cosmotheandric intuition;¹¹⁰ in it, the human is seen not as a passive subject—recipient and keeper of divinely given revelations within isolated traditions—but the active participant and co-creator of their own destiny, in an ecumenical context.

Indeed, the interfaith encounter affects the human mystical destiny (and so the future of religion) through changes in the experience of the Trinity. These changes occur through three possible hypostatic alterations: (type a) hypostatic revelations—discoveries of hypostases not yet experienced (e.g., the awakening of the Spirit Force in an emptiness-focused contemplative who is oblivious of such possibility, or the revelation of the Christ or Light of being in an individual only familiarized with the Absolute and/or the Spirit Force); (type b) hypostatic alternations—transversal alterations or cross-hypostatic movements, which shift the focus of experience from one hypostasis to another (e.g., the temporal transfer of the existential attention from the Christ to the Father/Universal Spirit, while the realization of the Advaitic truth is stabilized, as experienced by Christian interfaith contemplatives, or the change of focus of Sri Aurobindo’s realization from his Nirvanic experience to the supramental descent); (type c) hypostatic progressions—further developments within an already experienced hypostasis (e.g., within the Third Hypostasis, developments of the Spirit Force, changing from ascending to descending processes, as testified in meetings with Sri Ramana and Sri Aurobindo; or within the First Hypostasis, the deepening of the experience of the Universal Spirit, from all-pervading consciousness to emptiness [*śūnyatā*] through a meeting with a Buddhist master; or to Transcendence [*turyaga*] with a Hindu-Jnana master).

Once a meeting in being includes the experiential dimension, the dynamics of the exchange are not necessarily equal; for example, some encounters take place in a gentle equanimity, while others involve a deep transformation for either one or both parties involved. That is, to accept the reality of a diversity of faith traditions

¹⁰⁹ Panikkar emphasizes that “Man” is not gender-specific in his work; see Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being*, 295–98, 349, 400–401.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, chs. 6 and 7.

and mystical sages does not mean to impose the ideal of equality among them. Panikkar said: “A Christian will never ‘under-stand’ Hinduism if he is not converted to Hinduism. Never will a Hindu ‘under-stand’ Christianity unless he becomes a Christian.”¹¹¹ But he did not say such understanding was to be found in equal terms—one must go “under-” the surface, as Panikkar implies, and accept whatever is the foundational truth of each tradition involved. Indeed, it is a fact of mystical experience—beyond one’s own preferences and will—that the processes associated with each hypostasis are not accentuated equally at all times, nor represented equally by all traditions (e.g., Christianity tends to emphasize the Second Hypostasis, Hinduism, the Third and First). And so, as a result of these encounters, one may be drawn to experiences associated with hypostases yet not acknowledged, adopt new practices, and even explore philosophical variations, seemingly at the “expense” of hypostases already known, or of various features of one’s original tradition. Yet, these changes are explicable through the abovementioned hypostatic alterations.

For example, the existence of (type b) hypostatic alternations (*ha*) explains the apparent indifference of Aurobindo toward the realization of the Absolute (First Hypostasis) while working through the descent of the Spirit Force, directed toward the revitalization of the Personal Spirit, Individual Divine, or “Christos in men” (a Third and Second Hypostases’ work). Thus, Aurobindo shows a hypostatic alternation with the pattern first-to-third-and-second (1-3+2 *ha*), while, usually, Eastern approaches trigger a third-to-first (3-1 *ha*) alternation (e.g., classical yoga, Tantric paths, Ramana¹¹²), and Hindu-Christian approaches a second-to-first (2-1 *ha*) alternation (e.g., Abhishiktananda, Panikkar, Griffiths), even if the Trinity is theologically acknowledged throughout the entire path, and the hypostases are harmonized at times, or at the end. The interfaith encounter thus may awaken unforeseen dynamics in the experience of the hypostases and a rich variety of possibilities beyond the limitations of one’s own original tradition.

Panikkar makes a further critical point (it marks his approach within the interfaith tradition, differentiating it from comparative religion): “The integral question is not, for instance, whether the idea of ‘grace’ in Śaivism is similar to the idea of ‘grace’ according to Christianity, but whether the good Śaivite has all that he needs with his ‘grace’ and his religion and will not need to become a Christian, or vice versa.”¹¹³ Thus, “grace” is a word that may be interpreted in similar or different ways, but the primacy of experience present in existential interfaith shows the reality of grace based on the mystical facts of different faith traditions, not on interpretations. Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda) embraced such reality through both Christian and Hindu practice—his commitment to Christ and to his grace did

¹¹¹ Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, 11.

¹¹² Ramana’s teachings need to be read through a positive hermeneutics of suspicion when universalizing much and not commenting on important aspects of his own yoga (divine energy dynamics, etc.); see Ganapati Muni and Kapali Sastriar, *Sri Ramana Gita*, ch. 9; *Be As You Are* (ed. Godman), 141–42; Ramana Maharshi, *Talks with Ramana Maharshi*, 313.

¹¹³ Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, 7.

not prevent him from pursuing the Hindu-Shaivite path and its grace-given self-realization in a complementary manner. However, when embracing the non-dual Hindu-Shaivite realization, he did not just “add” something extra to his Christian experience. That is: he was deeply transformed and challenged by this venture, first, due to an initial (type a) hypostatic revelation (his apprehension of the truth of Advaita, upon his existential meeting with Sri Ramana Maharshi), which then turned into a (type b) hypostatic alternation (the temporary change of focus from the Second to the First Hypostasis, triggering a subsequent tension with his prior Christocentric view), finally giving place to a (type c) hypostatic progression (deeper experiences of the Christ within himself witnessed by his disciple Marc Chaduc, showing a development within the Second Hypostasis at an experiential level, together with a final reconciliation in the Trinity, through the I AM principle).¹¹⁴

Thus, an understanding of the mystical-existential dynamics portrayed in this article is of crucial importance for interfaith dialogue—for its fruition, but also for understanding its challenges. For example, the alternation of hypostases explains the doubts of Henri Le Saux, and his feeling of betraying his Christian vows, when the Universal Spirit (the Absolute, First Hypostasis) took a preponderant position in his journey. Such an experience—an awakening to the Infinite—presented itself as if he were betraying the Son for the Father, something that, with a full account of the mystical phenomenology possible within the Trinity, he could have explained¹¹⁵ and, only maybe, avoided. (The problem Le Saux faced is that of the Christocentric traditions when facing an interfaith encounter—their neglect of the First and Third Hypostases of the Trinity, precisely the two hypostases more emphasized by the Eastern traditions, corresponding to Brahman and Shakti in Hinduism.) As the case of Le Saux portrays, the complementary experiential truths held by different traditions are not necessarily integrated through an easy endeavor; that is, it might be so—for what transpires, for example, in the case of Panikkar is a much easier integration¹¹⁶—but not necessarily so.

Another possibility we must be ready to admit is that, even when the meeting is in being and among well-minded individuals who will a mutual understanding, there is a chance that the meeting will not advance too much, or simply will be left aside (postponed), or even considered unfeasible under the present circumstances. For example, there might be cases of apparent incompatibilities, such as the one between exclusively impersonal and personal paths¹¹⁷ (e.g., almost “nihilistic” paths versus personalistic-Christocentric paths), or of temporal incompatibilities, like that between ascending and descending divine energetics (e.g., ascending

¹¹⁴ du Boulay, *Cave of the Heart*, 229–42.

¹¹⁵ As a temporal hypostatic absence, due to a (type b) second-to-first (2-1 *ha*) alternation. (This understanding represents a “third-order” reading, complementary to Le Saux’s “second-order” interpretation.)

¹¹⁶ Aguilar, *Christian Ashrams*, ch. 6.

¹¹⁷ The question of whether the Divine is impersonal or personal is one of the first issues arising in East-West interreligious dialogue; see *The Common Heart* (ed. Miles-Yepe), ch. 2.

Kundalini Yoga versus Aurobindo's descending Integral Yoga) until an integration or synergic experience is reached. That there is a way to reconcile all possible mystical experiences, perspectives, and processes does not mean an interfaith encounter would lead, even often, to such broader integrative views; and there might be unexpected cases of "conversion" as well (not just of complementary integration). Thus, I want to emphasize that the fruition of existential interfaith is not a question of just being open- or closed-minded: there are incompatibilities (even if temporal), and challenges (external and internal), that may make a fruitful meeting unrealizable for the time being. This, we must accept.¹¹⁸

Notwithstanding the challenges, the interfaith meeting of traditions and its fruition appears to be unavoidable—it "belongs to the true dynamism of History."¹¹⁹ The experiential dimension of existential interfaith might be initially engaged only by counted individuals, yet interfaith dialogue is not an individual endeavor isolated from the collective dimension of reality. What is possible for one becomes "possible for the many," says the principle of inductive resonance,¹²⁰ that is, there is the conviction across faith traditions (based on observation) that the mystical attainments achieved through the struggle, work, and sacrifice of single individuals become possible attainments for other human beings; and this constitutive conviction must be remembered when considering the value of interfaith dialogue. It is in this spirit that Panikkar asserted that the interfaith encounter, even if carried on by few individuals, "is not only an individualistic affair, but a collective, an *ecclesial* endeavor."¹²¹ Therefore, the wider acknowledgment of the mystical-existential dimension in society and a more open attitude to the interfaith encounter in the world reflects and meditates upon cumulative single individual attainments—thus the importance of the singularity. In this direction, Peter Tyler states: "Abhishiktananda's [Le Saux's] struggle can be seen as a search for spirituality against the divisive forces of fundamentalism—both our own and those of the encountered 'other.'"¹²² If so, any individual engaging in a genuine interfaith encounter would contribute—as *pontifex maximus*, within their own cosmotheandric experience¹²³—to the divine evolution of humanity.

C. Third Characteristic: Focus on Truest Meaning

The approach to interfaith dialogue embodied in Ramana and Aurobindo is a return to the origin of concepts and meanings within a purely subjective dialogue, grounded in concrete realities of our perception and being. When the dialogue (worded or un-worded) is grounded in mystical experience, we can find a space of

¹¹⁸ Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, 11.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹²⁰ Portilla, *Spiritual Experience*, 139–40 n. 76.

¹²¹ Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, 11–12 (italics in original).

¹²² Peter Tyler, "Swami Abhishiktananda and the Possibility of Christian *Sannyāsa*," *Studies in Spirituality* 27 (2017) 295–321, at 320.

¹²³ Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being*, chs. 6 and 7.

shared understanding and explore a form of inquiry that inhibits the possibility of any superficial or intellectualized fight on words and symbols, as it is a dialogue of spiritually mature individuals, companions on an eternal journey.

In the context of Hindu-Christian interfaith dialogue: if we understand Shiva is the Light effulgence,¹²⁴ which reveals itself within the Absolute, as the threshold separating the spiritual cosmos from the Divine; if we acknowledge Vishnu is the Divine Power of balance, which reaches out and manifests in being as the white-blue Agape or Overmind; if we recognize Christ is the Logos involved in all functions of Harmony and Regeneration, and which manifests as the Light within all the coherent forms of the apprehended creation; then, we can have a profound interfaith encounter that speaks a language of complementarity. Ramana and Aurobindo demonstrate how to be in interfaith dialogue, challenging mythic and absolutistic mindsets in the realm of a universal understanding based on shared experience. Hence, even when Ramana is an Avatic embodiment of Shiva (the Clear Light), and Aurobindo of Vishnu (the Overmind), thus representing different divine realities, only an unknown truth could prevent their understanding. Indeed, when Aurobindo says, “When we look beyond our first exclusively concentrated vision, we see behind Vishnu all the personality of Shiva and behind Shiva all the personality of Vishnu,”¹²⁵ it is not out of hope for equality and conciliation (of the Vishnu-based and Shiva-based traditions), but he is asserting a truth beyond both appearances and sectarianisms.

The exposure to interfaith dialogue forces us to see beyond our “concentrated vision” (as Aurobindo says) and to be open to interfaith insights, which reveal the truest meaning of words and symbols. Interfaith pioneer Brother David Steindl-Rast gives us a testimony of precisely such an opening: only through his experiential interfaith studies of Zen Buddhism did he realize that the visual representations of both Christ and Buddha were but symbols pointing to “the Great Mystery” that Christians “call God” and Buddhists “keep . . . unnamed.”¹²⁶ Steindl-Rast also shows us how a deep use of words and meanings helps us to navigate only apparent conflicts: while pondering the substantial differences between Christian and Zen monastic practices, he realized these were due to the different hypostatic emphases of Christianity and Zen but were not a conflict in the Trinity; he states: “In our chant at Mount Saviour, the Eternal Word praises the Father in the Holy Spirit; here, in contrast, the Word of praise returns—in the same Holy Spirit—into the Silence of the Father.”¹²⁷

Thus, all spiritual concepts need to be brought to their origin and fruition, beyond their temporal container, as if leaving behind their “religious guardian,” to

¹²⁴ A hermeneutical-phenomenological reading of Skanda Mahapurana, v. 40; see *The Glory of Arunachala* (trans. M. C. Subramanian; 2nd ed.; Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 2004) 212.

¹²⁵ Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, 586.

¹²⁶ David Steindl-Rast, *i am through you so i: Reflections at Age 90* (trans. Peter Dahm Robertson; New York: Paulist, 2017) 93–94.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

a universality that is supported by the very traditions wanting to let go of labels. For when we comprehend the universals in which the experiences and contributions of each tradition are built, we can understand their complementarity and placement in the very structure of reality—the Trinity. Such is the way, following Panikkar’s thought, that every religion that represents an eternal truth ought “to be *converted* into *the* Religion of mankind.”¹²⁸ To bring a concept to its origin does not mean to go back to what the concept once meant, nor to reject its tradition with its sacred culture and texts, but to enter into a conscious cocreation with its truest meaning, so that it can flourish in our very being because its truest meaning is an existential reality. That is, just as existence is “tempiternal” (as Panikkar suggests¹²⁹), we shall then embrace the tempiternality of meaning, according to which any concept is neither temporal nor eternal, alone; thus, truest meaning speaks to becoming but also to being, both existential realities related in a “nondualistic” manner.¹³⁰ In other words, if rhythm represents the dynamism of the non-dual relationship between becoming (temporality) and being (eternity), then truest meaning is the expression of the rhythm of non-dual existence. Consequently, focusing on the truest meaning enables concepts (ideas) to be expressed in a language that induces our “tuning” with the rhythm of non-dual existence.

Such tuning with existence—which the ancient Taoists called “to be one with the Tao” or “to move without movement” (*wei-wu-wei*)—is very much the concern of Panikkar in his Gifford Lectures, titled *The Rhythm of Being* (2010). In them, Panikkar explores the placement of rhythm¹³¹ within the non-dual apprehension of reality: through it, “Identity and difference, subjectivity and objectivity, are overcome.”¹³² The words of Ramana (spoken) and of Aurobindo (written) evoke the rhythm of existence Panikkar spoke of. Rhythm is embodied in Ramana’s deep listening to the words and being of visitors, who only receive a worded answer after long periods of silent transmission in which time and eternity seem no different, while the true meaning of their words is being revealed. Ramana speaks then, while in constant apprehension of the Eternal Being, with an orientation to give insight into the nature of Ultimate Reality for which linear rationality is sacrificed for suprarational discernment and insight. Similarly, Aurobindo’s writings aim to honor his realized existential truths, as they present themselves, in all their might and complexity. Aurobindo’s concern is not to be accessible but to be truthful—to convey the truest meaning. His style facilitates the reader’s tuning with the rhythm of existence, as his ideas are not dissociated from the way they are expressed, thus the relationship between rhythm and truest meaning. In fact, for Aurobindo, rhythm

¹²⁸ Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, 19–20 (italics in original).

¹²⁹ “We cannot be satisfied with either continuing or reforming the old. Each existence is *tempiternal*. . . . Our task and our responsibility are to assimilate the wisdom of bygone traditions and, having made it our own, to allow it to grow”; see Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being*, xxvii.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 48.

is so essential to truth that he chose the form of an epic poem (*Savitri*) to express his most advanced insights and to explore the heights of his own consciousness; in it, Aurobindo points out that “the characters are not personified qualities, but incarnations or emanations of living and conscious Forces.”¹³³ In rhythm thus lies the justification of the importance of poetry in mysticism, and in the existential interfaith encounter, as a fitting way of expressing the truest meaning of words and symbols, free from the sociocultural burdens of “common daily language.”¹³⁴

Thus, the rhythm—the Soul vibrato, not the cadence—of language reflects the rhythm of existence, in which the three characteristics of existential interfaith are interrelated: existential interfaith is the encounter in being, which fully acknowledges the experiences of being, and whose dialogue focuses on the truest meaning of words and symbols, as they are but an expression of the rhythm of existence—the rhythm of just being. If the three characteristics of existential interfaith were to be put through a visual metaphor, then a musical one would be most fitting: being is the instrument; mystical experiences—the musical notes; and truest meaning—the rhythm, of a cosmic opera.

■ Conclusion

The “vast synthesis” and “widely embracing harmonisation” Sri Aurobindo spoke of seem closer today than in his time. Even so, any interreligious scenario moving in such a direction will not come without challenges that run deeper than the philosophical/theological, institutional, and cultural ones—challenges displayed at the mystical-existential level, which we should not ignore.

This article responds to the need for finding an approach that would enable a fair scholarly representation of the Eastern “Other.” To that end, it combines a phenomenological emphasis on hermeneutics together with Clooney’s suggestions from comparative theology, Flood’s three orders of discourse in religious studies, and Panikkar’s insights on intrareligious dialogue. As a central inquiry, I explore the main characteristics of an explicitly experiential interfaith dialogue—existential interfaith—based on a variety of interrelated mystical narratives of important figures for the Hindu and Christian traditions. In doing so, I develop a framework that accounts for the possibilities, complexity, and challenges of interfaith encounters. Insights obtained through this inquiry (e.g., the realization of different and changing experiences of the Trinity) indicate that scholarly discussions on mysticism and interreligious/interfaith dialogue can benefit from the nuanced study of the diversity

¹³³ See “Author’s Note” in Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* (CWSA 33 and 34; Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1997).

¹³⁴ Mario I. Aguilar, *The Way of the Hermit: Interfaith Encounters in Silence and Prayer* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2017) 22. See also Clooney’s theopoetics in Francis X. Clooney, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Encountering Traditions; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

of experiences, intricacies, and evolutionary patterns observable in interfaith encounters.

I argue that interfaith mysticism affects and shapes religion. This article identifies patterns of experience that can have an impact on the future of religion; however, the analysis of scenarios and effects at the philosophical/theological, institutional, and cultural levels lies beyond the scope of the inquiry. As a final remark, our attitudes toward other faiths seem to have a surprisingly dubious consequence in the actual shaping of religion (at least at the mystical-experiential level). That is, the existential dynamics that operate in interreligious/interfaith encounters (in being) appear to be uncontrollable by human intention, preference, or will. If this is the case, we may have to accept that the interreligious reality we live in is more than a circumstance that needs to be “dealt with,” and that the interreligious encounter “belongs to the true dynamism of History.”¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, 12.