



A Critical Assessment of Psychological Theories of Ecstasy. Towards an Integrative Model for Theorising Ecstasy

Moritz Deecke

University of Leipzig

Abstract

In this article a number of approaches toward ecstasy or ecstatic spirit possession are explored that take a decisively non-sociological approach to the subject. They stress the importance of acknowledging ecstasy and related phenomena not as by-products of social struggle but as actual experiences that are events with meaning and importance in the biographies of those who experience them. Some of these are psychological theories (exemplified by Abraham Maslow), some are theological (Teresa of Ávila), and some stand in between (Martin Buber). These psycho-theological theories contribute to understanding ecstasy and have to be taken into account. Emphasised at the end of the article is the need to reconcile these views with the seemingly contradictory theories of ecstasy such as that of Lewis.

Key words: Martin Buber, Abraham Maslow, Teresa of Avila, ecstasy, trance, spirit-possession, integral theory, integrative model, psychology of religion

Słowa kluczowe: Martin Buber, Abraham Maslow, św. Teresa z Ávila, ekstaza, trans, opętanie, integralna teoria, integracyjny model, psychologia religii

In the preface to the second edition of his *Ecstatic Religion*¹, Ioan Myrddin Lewis answers the criticism that his sociological theory ultimately draws on psychological reasons to explain spirit possession. His answer – that psychological and sociological issues are always and intrinsically intertwined and that therefore the sociological fallacy (according to Durkheim) does not apply to him – is in my opinion satisfactory. One might add that psychological explanations *vice versa* ultimately refer to social matters. But in Lewis's theory sociological factors serve as the **predominant features of explanation**, just as there are other theories that put their primary emphasis on the psychology of ecstasy.

¹ I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion. A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*, London 1989.

In my previous article² I argued that Lewis's theory of ecstasy, though highly valuable and endowed with high explanatory power, falls short in being able to explain some instances (one might say categories) of ecstasy. In his paradigm ecstatic spirit-possession is always used to improve or protect material or social status. Therefore it can be defined as a "means of fighting for material goods and social power between social agents (e.g. classes, sexes)"³. Even though this actually often proves true, it cannot explain all those instances of ecstasy in the history (or present) of religions where ecstasies do not strive for more power or goods, but often do not show much interest for both possessions or higher regard. It also falls short of explaining how it is the case that in many non-hierarchical and non-exploitative social settings ecstatic spirit-possession prevails in some form or another. But most important perhaps is the fact that Lewis's paradigm generally interprets ecstatic spirit-possession as a direct or indirect form of aggression, whereas ecstasy is often described as an experience of abundant love, beauty and bliss for which an aggressive mind-set, and therefore an act of aggression, is not likely to follow, but the contrary.

Even though Lewis makes repeatedly assurances that the actual act of possession is a question that the social anthropologist cannot decide on, his statements such as those that Somali women's argumentative strategies against the allegation of fraud-possession by their husbands are an "ingenious sophistry"⁴ prove him wrong. In fact, the trajectory of his argumentation as a whole leads to the denial of the possibility of the authenticity of ecstasy at all by reducing all of them to by-products of what really matters: power. This contradicts theories that take ecstasy (or ecstatic spirit possession) seriously as a psychological state. In the following pages three of these approaches will be explored and their claims explained. They take ecstasy as a latent possibility that can be actualised and often leads to profound individual transformation. The article ends with highlighting the contradictions of these approaches to Lewis's sociological theory and the need for an interpretative framework that reconciles them.

Martin Buber's refutation of sociological approaches to ecstasy

In 1910, at the first meeting of the *Deutscher Soziologentag* ("German Sociologists' Day") Martin Buber responded to a presentation by Ernst Troeltsch that provided a typology of the sociological categories of church, sect, and mysticism. The last of these can be understood as one of **the** major cultural frameworks in which ecstasy appears in the history of religions. Buber commented on that lecture with the objection that mysticism is actually **not** a *fait social*, but quite the opposite:

² M. Deecke, *A Critical Assessment of Lewis's Sociological Theory of Ecstasy. Towards an Integrative Model for Theorising Ecstasy*, "Studia Religiosa" 2012, No. 45 (4), p. 283–292.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 289.

⁴ I.M. Lewis, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

[I would like] to pose the question as to the extent to which (...) mysticism is a sociological category at all. For I would like to affirm that it is not such a category, that it is solely a psychological category (...). I believe mysticism is best qualified as religious solipsism. On the one hand it is the most complete realisation of that type of religiosity which is a form of self-awareness and intensity of self-maximising that enables an 'apperception of God', a personal relationship to a content of the soul that is perceived as God.

It (...) seems to me on the other hand that it is very far from religion as a sociological entity resting on religiosity. To me it seems more adequate that mysticism is negating all society, not fighting it, not opposing against it, as a sect would do, but negating it, and mainly because there is only one real relationship for the individual here, the relationship to God. Thus, the process Professor Troeltsch was referring to, the act of believers getting together so that all their lines converge in God, actually does not take place, but in fact each and every believer in his belief stays isolated, and communicates with nothing but with his God. It can be conceded that mysticism frequently associates with sociological structures. (...) But it must be emphasised that all this is nothing but product of such association⁵.

Though I find the definition of mysticism as "religious solipsism" problematic, Buber makes a valid point, for ecstasy **does have** a psychological side that is extremely important for it. But Buber, unlike Lewis, is not referring to ulterior (or inferior) motifs such as manipulating others, gaining influence etc., but arguing that spiritual mysticism is a genuinely psychological category, and emphasising the ecstatic experience itself. In another book Buber points out that in some cultural circumstances these experiences are most likely not to be expressed publicly, but to take a quite different, more silent way of manifesting themselves⁶, therefore not leaving a possibility for manipulation or instrumentalisation.

While some people value in Buber the erudite scholar of religions, others regard him "as a gifted native informant rather than a social scientist!"⁷. Be that as it may, for many years there has been an important and widely recognised tradition of the psychological enquiry of ecstasy as part of the psychology of religion and beyond, of which Buber is only one, and not the most prominent, proponent. These traditions

⁵ Translation M.D.; see: P. Mendes-Flohr, *Nachwort* [in:] M. Buber, *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, Heidelberg 1984, p. 241–260, p. 247–248: "[Ich möchte] die Frage aufwerfen, inwiefern (...) die Mystik überhaupt eine soziologische Kategorie ist. Ich möchte nämlich behaupten, daß sie keine solche, daß sie lediglich eine psychologische Kategorie ist (...). Ich glaube, die Mystik darf als religiöser Solipsismus bezeichnet werden. Sie ist auf der einen Seite wohl die absoluteste Verwirklichung der *Religiosität* als jener Eigenart der Selbstwahrnehmung und jener Intensität der Selbststeigerung, die eine 'Apperzeption Gottes', die Stiftung eines persönlichen Verhältnisses zu einem als Gott empfundenen Seeleninhalt ermöglicht. Sie (...) scheint mir aber andererseits sehr weit entfernt zu sein von der *Religion* als einem auf der Religiosität aufgebauten soziologischen Ganzen. Es scheint mir, daß die Mystik vielmehr alle Gemeinschaft negiert, nicht etwa bekämpft, nicht sich ihr gegenüberstellt, wie die Sekte, sondern sie negiert, und zwar deshalb, weil es für sie nur *eine* reale Beziehung gibt, die Beziehung des Einzelnen zu Gott, weil also hier jener Vorgang, den Professor Troeltsch andeutete, das Zusammentreffen der Gläubigen, von denen alle Linien zu Gott führen, gar nicht stattfindet, sondern jeder Gläubige hier in seiner Gläubigkeit durchaus isoliert bleibt und es mit nichts anderem zu tun hat als mit seinem Gott. Nun muß natürlich zugegeben werden, daß sich die Mystik sehr häufig mit soziologischen Strukturen verbindet. (...) Aber das sind alles, das muß betont werden, bloß Verbindungsprodukte".

⁶ Cf. M. Buber, *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, Leipzig 1921, p. 9.

⁷ V. Turner, *Liminality and Communitas* [in:] V. Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*, New Brunswick–London 2011, p. 94–130, 126.

have with good reasons emphasised the reality of the subjective, personal experience of ecstasy, thus recognising it as an **altered state of consciousness**, which can ultimately not be reduced to sociological, economical or other matters. William James, for example, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, emphasised that extraordinary altered states must be taken into account if one wishes to understand many religious phenomena, and no theory of the universe would be complete without considering these experiences⁸. These states cannot be dismissed hastily as imaginary, fantastical, mythological, irrational, and so on, but the cases must be evaluated individually. Not being religious himself, in his work James maintained an open mind towards his objects of research, as good science always requires⁹.

Abraham Maslow's understanding of the term "peak-experience"

Another influential, but somewhat more modern psychological approach to ecstasy was provided by Abraham Maslow¹⁰, who coined the term *peak-experience* (Buber too spoke of ecstasy as the "summit" or "peak of existence", *Gipfel des Daseins*¹¹). For one of the pioneers of the humanistic psychology of the 1950s and '60s peak-experiences (including ecstasy) are highly valuable events in human life that help in generating meaning, health, and happiness. They are the crowns of the development of a human being that grows to its full potential. Maslow believes that when consciously aspired and continuously trained these peak-experiences lose their ephemeral nature and become more steady states (*plateau-experiences*¹²). He emphasises the positive, growth-generating, health-promoting side of ecstatic states.

His conclusions: Far from being regressive and merely a result of compensation, peak-experiences [such as ecstasy, M.D.] enable a perception that is free of fear and needs, in which the cosmos and fellow human beings are conceived as valuable and death and pain are more easily accepted. They are accompanied by self-realisation, sometimes have therapeutic effects, and enhance religious conversions¹³.

These evidence-based conclusions are very valuable themselves, but it must not be forgotten that ecstasy seems (notwithstanding the fact that it is often desired and has beneficial effects) to be intrinsically connected with quite contrary experiences such as extensive fear, alienation, depersonalisation (*Angstekstase*, "ecstasy of fear").

Even though Maslow first assumed that only few individuals have had peak-experiences, he later came to understand that these are in fact quite common. When stimu-

⁸ W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Rockville, Maryland 2008, p. 283.

⁹ Even if that meant that he had to boost his openness by experimenting with the psychotropic drug nitrous-oxide – see W. James, *Subjective Effects of Nitrous Oxide Mind*, "Mind" 1882, No. 7; R. Gerrig, P. Zimbardo, *Psychologie*, München 2008, p. 183.

¹⁰ A. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*, New York 1994.

¹¹ Ch. Schütz, *Verborgenheit Gottes. Martin Bubers Werk – eine Gesamtdarstellung*, Zürich – Einsiedeln – Köln 1976, p. 108.

¹² A. Maslow, *op.cit.*, p. XIV.

¹³ B. Grom, *Religionspsychologie*, München 2007, p. 203 [translation – M.D.]

lated with the right trigger (in so-called rhapsodic or isomorphic communication¹⁴), most individuals that have previously denied them can actually recall their own peak-experiences and even re-experience them. According to Maslow, peak-experiences in fact belong to the regular development of a strong and healthy individual. If they do not occur at all something has gone wrong¹⁵.

Maslow gives a list of 25 characteristics and effects that can come with peak-experiences¹⁶. The most important are: to comprehend the universe as an integrated, unified Whole; a feeling of independence from the “outer” world, and therefore greater objectivity; transcending the ego; they “can make life worthwhile by their occasional occurrence” by giving “meaning to life itself”¹⁷; they are valuable in themselves and not means to another end; they can contain “experiencing universality and eternity”¹⁸; the world is experienced as exclusively beautiful, good, and worth living; they are a way “of becoming godlike”¹⁹, understood in such a way that attributes that were formerly given to an external God are realised inwardly by human beings themselves; they are often accompanied with a changed attitude toward death, since the experience itself resembles experiences of death²⁰; they lead to less fear and sometimes bring therapeutic benefits with them; in consequence “heaven” is not understood as a geographical place, but as a state that is potentially accessible at all times and all places; the self-identity is strengthened, one becomes “more a real person”, more responsible, more active; “unitive consciousness” shines through the secular appearance of the world and is experienced as holy.

Teresa of Avila’s descriptions of ecstasy and its effects

“[T]he expert of experts in describing such conditions”²¹ as ecstasy is Teresa of Avila. In her *Castillo Interior* she describes seven different stages of inner development, whereof the first three belong to the ordinary, “natural” realm, and the subsequent four are characterised as “supernatural” (*cosas sobranaturales*). These can usually be only accessed by those who have had substantial training and preparation for long periods of time²². She undertakes the difficult task of phenomenologically describing these states with Christian vocabulary, mainly that of 16th-century Spanish Catholi-

¹⁴ A. Maslow, *op.cit.*, p. 84–90.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 59–68.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 62.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 64.

²⁰ “Ecstasy is somehow close to death-experience, at least in the simple, empirical sense that death is often mentioned during reports of peaks, sweet death that is. (...) Experiencing a kind of ‘sweet death’ may remove its frightening aspect”. A. Maslow, *op.cit.*, p. 76.

²¹ W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience...*, p. 299.

²² Teresa de Ávila, *Obras Completas*, Madrid 1994, p. 869 ff.

cism. Teresa is self-reflective about the use of her language, and often indicates if a descriptive phrase is intended as description, picture or metaphor.

The *Oración de Recogimiento*²³ (“Prayer of Recollection”) is characteristic of the developments from the fourth castle onward, and can lead to a restructuring and strengthening of the personality. It brings about greater inwardness, independence and autonomy of the personality. When the Prayer of Recollection is being experienced regularly, it leads to profound changes in the identity.

Because she [the soul, M.D.] has already tasted the joys of God, she understands that those of the world are rubbish. She withdraws herself more and more from them and gains more control over herself. In short, she grows in all virtues and she will continue to grow (...) But this is not to be understood that those effects stay with the soul if God has given this mercy once or twice to her and she does not continue to receive them, because perseverance is bringing us all the good²⁴.

In her *Autobiography* Teresa relates how important her ecstatic or visionary experiences were for the development she has undergone, and how this affected the major decisions in her life²⁵. These “joys” are to be taken literally here as actual inner experiences that profoundly differ from the intensity and depth of experiences of ordinary everyday life. There is a qualitative breach that separates them from what most people usually experience. She describes them in the language and style she feels most comfortable in: narrative accounts, theological vocabulary, or poetic tropes. Yet this does not make it likely that they are a fictional accounts (let alone being intended to be seen as such): Teresa’s integrity and honesty urge us to understand them as truly extraordinary, yet real self-experiences. She differentiates between different kinds of experiences with words such as *impetus*, *arrobamiento*, *arreatamiento*, *suspensión*, and *raptó*. The most famous of her descriptions is most likely the account of the *transverberatio*, an ecstatic vision of an angel that repeatedly pierced her heart with a flaming arrow so that there was

(...) such great pain that it made me moan, and at the same time this pain caused such excessive sweetness that one would never want to miss it nor be content with anything less than God from now on. It is not a bodily pain, but a spiritual even though the body in some way participates in it. It is such a sweet caressing between the soul and God that I pray to him in his mercy to make anybody feel it who says that I am lying²⁶.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 880 ff.

²⁴ “(...) como ha probado ya los gustos de Dios, ve que es una basura los del mundo, vase poco a poco apartando de ellos y es más señora de sí para hacerlo. En fin, en todas las virtudes queda mejorada y no dejará de ir creciendo (...) Tampoco se entiende que de una vez o dos que Dios haga esta merced a un alma quedan todas estas hechas si no va perseverando en recibir las, que en esta perservancia está todo nuestro bien”. *Ibidem*, p. 885 [translation – M.D.].

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 3 ff.

²⁶ “Era tan grande el dolor, que me hacía dar aquellos quejidos, y tan excesiva la suavidad que me pone este grandísimo dolor, que non hay desear que se quite ni se contenta el alma con menos que Dios. No es dolor corporal, sino espiritual, aunque no deja de participar el cuerpo algo, y aun harto. Es un requiebro tan suave que pasa entre el alma y Dios, que suplico yo a su bondad lo dé a gustar a quien pensare que miento”. *Ibidem*, p. 196.

From the numerous spots where she talks about the effects of experiences like this, here are just a few: when those or other “gustos” are granted “the soul” develops the desire to suffer if a service can thus be rendered to God, but if this is not the case she will no longer agonise about it as she would have done earlier²⁷. She loses her fear of death²⁸ and ceases to care about her honour and reputation²⁹. She gains the freedom to commit mortal sins, even if not from committing venial sins³⁰. She would prefer to stay alone by herself, but if not she would only want to do things that help others³¹. Of some experiences she writes that they happen “so often that it becomes so normal that it can be observed and scrutinised”³². There are many examples of extensive and detailed descriptions of altered states of consciousness and the positive or sometimes dangerous side-effects they can bring about in many of Teresa’s works. Here it is crucial to note that though the cultural backgrounds differ greatly there are many parallels and distinctive similarities with Maslow’s theory of ecstasy, especially in the consideration of the factuality of extraordinary inner experiences such as ecstasy and their often beneficial biographical effects.

The value of psycho-theological theories of ecstasy

I have previously called this set of theories “psycho-theological”³³. This term is little bit bulky, but makes the point that all these theories are concerned with the *inner side* of phenomena such as ecstasy, and because of their depth or intensity they have traditionally been attributed to theology, and that no **principal** distinction can or should be drawn between them. In a different, more secular framework they are dealt with in psychology. What Teresa does is not much different from what the psychologists James or Maslow or the psychiatrists Schüttler³⁴ or Spoerri³⁵ do: phenomenologically describing extraordinary and sometimes **extremely** pleasurable or beneficial experiences and thinking about how they can be cultivated and best made use of. Except that Teresa was a Catholic woman of 16th-century Spain and expressed herself in the language of that time and place³⁶. But these descriptions nevertheless remain important for psychology. The conjunction of “psychological” and “theological” into “psycho-theological” therefore indicates that (even if only in theorising altered states

²⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 984.

²⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 985.

²⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 991.

³⁰ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 989 et seq.

³¹ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 985.

³² “(...) que se ha mirado bien con advertencia”. *Ibidem*, p. 985.

³³ See M. Deecke, op.cit.

³⁴ G. Schüttler, *Das mystisch-ekstatische Erlebnis. Systematische Darstellung der Phänomenologie und des psychopathologischen Aufbaus. Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde der Höheren Medizinischen Fakultät der Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Bonn*, 1968.

³⁵ *Beiträge zur Ekstase*, T. Spoerri (ed.), Basel–New York 1968.

³⁶ Of course this does not mean that the complicated interrelationship between language, experience, culture, and their reciprocative influences should be neglected.

of consciousness, and here only applying to the good theories) theology and psychology have very similar scopes. With their own good reasons these theories deliberately either neglect (Maslow, Teresa) or wholly deny (Buber) the importance of sociological factors in theorising ecstasy.

Preliminary contradictions and incommensurabilities³⁷ of sociological and psychological approaches

At this point of the argument we may conclude that there are at least **two general types of diverging approaches to ecstasy** that stand in sharp contrast to each other. Roughly speaking, so far:

- one type of theory explains ecstasy by connecting it exclusively to material and social interests (sociological and etic perspective)
- the other type explains ecstasy causally as an altered state of consciousness (individual and emic perspective).

These two approaches differ fundamentally from each other and are, so far, contradictory: Either ecstasy and spirit possession are a by-product of the war of the sexes and clashes for power, disguising them under the convincing mimicry of religious, or they are a genuine psychological state in their own right with important potential for human development. These two opposing standpoints seem to go along the discursive lines which the cultural competitors of sociology of religion and phenomenology of religion have long embraced. The sociological approach has a critical edge by undermining religion's own assessments; the other tends to be favourable towards religion by trying to make it accessible for rational minds. The epistemological foundations they rely on come from the research traditions of positivism and hermeneutics. These are simplifications, but they are commonly used in the academic field, and help to understand many debates that have been going on in the academic study of religions. They are useful if they provide orientation by reducing some of the complexity but should not be overemphasised or reified. In his intriguing article Köpping uses the same basic distinctions (applicable to the field of the study of religions) when he ascertains that to date there has been no “merging of theological theories

³⁷ One of the first to develop the notion of incommensurability (*niewspółmierność*) that was to become so important for 20th-century epistemology was the Polish physician and epistemologist Ludwik Fleck (Cf. L. Schäfer, T. Schnelle, *Ludwik Flecks Begründung der soziologischen Betrachtungsweise in der Wissenschaftstheorie* [in:] L. Fleck, *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache. Einführung in die Lehre vom Denkstil und Denkkollektiv*, Frankfurt am Main 1980, p. XXI). It is not used here to indicate methodological incommensurability between the subdisciplines such as sociology or psychology of religion, but the taxonomic incommensurability that is used to describe different assignments of meanings to the same concept (in this case ecstasy) and therefore make the theories incommensurable (Cf. E. Oberheim, P. Hoyningen-Huene, *The Incommensurability of Scientific Theories*, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E.N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/incommensurability/> [accessed: 1.02.2013]).

about mystic states and social-scientific categories”³⁸. At the same time the acclaimed anthropologist seems to acknowledge that such coalescence is desirable.

The question that remains to be answered is in which way these approaches are or are not commensurable with each other, and therefore if they really contradict each other on all levels. The commensurability that I would like to put into question is not that of diverging methodologies of two disciplines (Lewis, for example, has acknowledged the convertibility of psychological and sociological explanations), which they have *de facto* acknowledged by competing with each other for the better explanation. When theorising ecstasy one has to ask: were they really talking about the same type of ecstasy, or did they (maybe intuitively or unconsciously) draw their material from wholly different backgrounds so that it can be grouped around different categories of ecstasy? Do their analyses possibly not only concern different aspects of the same phenomenon (social, individual), but refer to different phenomena, and are they therefore not contradictory but incommensurable?

What I would like to do in the next article is to make a suggestion for an interpretative framework that will try to solve these questions. This will be attempted by integrating the different strands of research in the academic study of religions into a greater whole and assigning their scopes to similar, but eventually different phenomena. They therefore turn not out to be contradictory, but rather incommensurable, since they apply to different types of phenomena. Their incommensurability, however, leads not to entire detachment from each other and a split into different fields, but to different perspectives and scopes within the same field of the academic study of religions. The aim is therefore to help to close futile debates and promote tolerance and plurality within its own ranks by establishing it as a diverse but unified discipline. Accordingly, it will attract more interested readers since it is more flexible and capable of answering a wider array of questions.

³⁸ K.-P. Köpping, *Ekstase* [in:] *Vom Menschen. Handbuch historische Anthropologie*, Ch. Wulf (ed.), Weinheim–Basel 1997, p. 548–568, p. 551. Further problems that he sees are (1) the difficulties in transforming the indigenous metaphors saturated by experience (*Erlebnisbilder*) into analytical, scientific categories, guaranteeing the intersubjective adequacy of the system of concepts; (2) the differentiation between true and false “madness”, or ecstasy (*ibidem*, p. 551). Whereas an approximation to solving the latter can be achieved by different hermeneutical methods (e.g. analysis of narrations as developed by Fritz Schütze, Magdeburg), the former remains a very difficult and as yet unaccomplished task.