Jurnal Iman dan Spiritualitas
eISSN: 2775-4596, Vol 6, No 4, 2026, pp. 1815-1826
https://doi.org/10.15575/jis.v6i4.56907

Spirituality Without Evidence: A Phenomenological Study of Mystical Experience in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

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Suggested Citation:

Supiana, Nana; Setiawan, Cucu. (2026). Spirituality Without Evidence: A Phenomenological Study of Mystical Experience in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion. *Jurnal Iman dan Spiritualitas*, Volume 6, Number 4: 1815–1826. https://doi.org/10.15575/jis.v6i4.56907

Article's History:

Received June 2026; *Revised* September 2026; *Accepted* November 2026.
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Abstract:

The post-truth era has fundamentally changed the epistemological landscape of religious faith. Objective facts have lost their hegemony, while subjective experiences and personal emotions have become the primary determinants of truth claims. In this context, mystical experiences, as a form of spirituality without empirical evidence, are often viewed as irrational or merely hallucinatory. This article aims to re-examine the epistemic status of mystical experiences through the lens of contemporary philosophy of religion, specifically by combining the insights of Søren Kierkegaard's religious existentialism and Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics, as well as a critical dialogue with Alvin Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology. The method used is library research with a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach. The analytical technique includes three stages: phenomenological reduction to capture the essence of mystical experiences as experienced by the subject, hermeneutic interpretation to explore the layers of meaning behind religious symbols, and comparative analysis between figures to synthesize a framework of epistemic justification. The main findings indicate that mystical experiences have their own justification that is not subject to the demands of objective proof ala Cartesian modernity. Kierkegaard offers a concept of subjective truth in which infinite desire thrives in objective uncertainty. Ricoeur complements this with a hermeneutics of symbols and testimony, where mystical experience is not reduced to literal propositions but is continually interpreted within the community of tradition. Plantinga, though coming from a different analytic tradition, provides an epistemic foundation with the concepts of properly basic belief and sensus divinitatis. In conclusion, spirituality without evidence is not a cognitive weakness but a legitimate mode of knowledge with its own internal logic. This article contributes to the discourse of contemporary philosophy of religion by offering a phenomenological justification for mystical experience amidst the epistemic skepticism of the post-truth era.

Keywords: mystical experience; Phenomenology; post-truth; Reformed Epistemology; Religious Existentialism; spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary philosophy of religion has experienced a significant shift in focus compared to previous periods. While in the classical and scholastic eras, debates in the philosophy of religion were largely focused on proving God's existence through rational arguments, such as ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments, in the modern and contemporary eras, the attention of religious philosophers has increasingly shifted

to epistemological issues, namely how humans acquire knowledge of God and the extent to which that knowledge can be justified. This shift did not emerge suddenly but is a consequence of the development of science, the criticism of traditional metaphysics, and changes in how humans understand truth and reality. In the history of Western thought, various figures such as René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud have posed major challenges to the foundations of religious belief. Descartes emphasized the importance of rational certainty as the basis of knowledge, while Kant limited the ability of human reason to reach noumenal reality, including God. Feuerbach interpreted religion as a projection of human needs, Marx viewed religion as an ideological instrument that perpetuates social injustice, and Freud considered religious belief a form of psychological illusion born of human emotional needs. These critiques shifted the landscape of the philosophy of religion from attempts to prove the existence of God to more fundamental questions about the epistemic status of religious experience and belief (Chittick, 1989).

Entering the 21st century, challenges to religion and faith no longer come solely from philosophical atheism or ideological critiques, as they did in the 19th and 20th centuries. More complex challenges arise from changes in the structure of human knowledge, marked by the rapid development of digital technology, social media, and information culture. Contemporary society lives in a condition often referred to as the post-truth era, a situation where objective facts are no longer the sole basis for forming public opinion. In this era, emotions, personal beliefs, group identities, and narratives circulated through digital media often have a greater influence than empirical data or evidence. The post-truth phenomenon has profound implications for religious life. On the one hand, society has increasingly broad access to a variety of information and worldviews. However, this openness of information also results in the fragmentation of knowledge and the relativization of truth. Various truth claims, whether scientific, philosophical, or religious, coexist and compete in the public sphere. As a result, modern individuals face a highly complex epistemic plurality. In this context, the classic question of "Does God exist?" is no longer the sole primary issue. The more pressing question is how humans can know God, understand religious experience, and justify their beliefs amidst various conflicting claims to truth (Adnan, 2021).

This issue becomes even more intriguing when linked to mystical experiences. In nearly all major religious traditions worldwide, mystical experiences occupy a crucial role. In the Islamic tradition, mystical experiences are found in Sufism and in the concept of ma'rifah (knowledge of God). In the Christian tradition, there is the experience of union with God, while in Hinduism and Buddhism, various forms of transcendental experiences are believed to lead humans to the highest spiritual awareness. Mystics from various traditions often describe these experiences as direct encounters with a reality that transcends ordinary language, concepts, and rational categories (Noordzeha, 2023). Nevertheless, mystical experiences are also one of the most problematic phenomena in the study of the philosophy of religion. The main difficulty lies in the highly personal and subjective nature of mystical experiences. Unlike scientific knowledge, which can be tested through public observation and repeated experiments, mystical experiences are generally accessible only to the individual experiencing them. These experiences often cannot be adequately explained in ordinary language, and even mystics themselves often state that their experiences are ineffable. It is this characteristic that raises questions about its epistemic validity: can mystical experiences be considered a valid source of knowledge, or are they merely subjective psychological phenomena?

Within the framework of modern epistemology, heavily influenced by rationalism and empiricism, mystical experiences are often viewed with skepticism. Because they cannot be publicly verified and do not meet standards of scientific objectivity, they are often considered to lack sufficient knowledge value. Some psychological approaches even explain these experiences as forms of hallucinations, delusions, neurological disorders, or projections of human emotional needs. This perspective places mystical experiences in a difficult position, as their validity is always measured using epistemological standards that actually originate from different knowledge traditions (Munawar, 2018). However, developments in contemporary philosophy of religion demonstrate that modern epistemological standards are not the only way to understand religious knowledge. A number of philosophers have begun to question the assumption that all forms of knowledge must be subject to the same criteria of objectivity and empirical verification. They argue that some forms of human experience have their own logic and justification mechanisms, including religious and mystical experiences. In this context, various new approaches have emerged that seek to provide epistemic space for religious experiences without reducing them to purely psychological or social phenomena.

One of the key figures in this discourse is Søren Kierkegaard. The Danish philosopher criticized the tendency of modern philosophy to overemphasize objectivity and ignore the existential dimension of human life. According to Kierkegaard, religious truth cannot be understood simply as a collection of propositions that must be

rationally proven. Religious truth is related to how individuals experience and live their beliefs existentially. Through the concept of "subjective truth," Kierkegaard shows that the human relationship with God involves a personal commitment that cannot be reduced to objective knowledge alone. From this perspective, mystical experiences gain legitimacy not because they can be scientifically proven, but because they have profound existential meaning for the individual experiencing them (Jalil, 2020). Kierkegaard's thinking was further developed in the work of Paul Ricoeur. Through a phenomenological hermeneutic approach, Ricoeur emphasized the importance of interpretation in understanding human experience. For him, religious and mystical experiences cannot be understood directly as objective facts nor reduced to subjective illusions. These experiences are presented through symbols, metaphors, and narratives that require a continuous process of interpretation. Religious symbols not only point to something, but also open up the possibility of new meanings that enrich human understanding of reality. Thus, mystical experiences gain relevance through a hermeneutical process that enables individuals and communities to grasp the deeper meaning of those experiences (Kierkegaard, 1985).

On the other hand, the tradition of analytical philosophy also offers a different approach through the reformed epistemology developed by Alvin Plantinga. Unlike the evidentialist view, which requires every belief to be supported by adequate evidence, Plantinga argues that belief in God can be a proper basic belief. This means that religious belief does not always require external arguments or proof to be rational. Plantinga developed the concept of sensus divinitatis, the natural human capacity to recognize and realize the existence of God. Through this concept, religious experience is understood as part of a cognitive mechanism that can produce valid knowledge as long as it functions appropriately in the appropriate environment. The thoughts of Kierkegaard, Ricoeur, and Plantinga offer interesting perspectives because each addresses the same question from different perspectives. Kierkegaard emphasizes the existential dimension and subjectivity, Ricoeur emphasizes the importance of symbolic interpretation, while Plantinga provides an epistemological basis for the rationality of religious belief. These three approaches show that mystical experiences do not have to be measured solely based on standards of scientific objectivity, but can be understood through a broader epistemic framework and according to their characteristics (Zaki et al., 2026).

Although numerous studies have been conducted on mystical experiences, most studies still tend to focus on a single approach, whether phenomenological, hermeneutical, psychological, or epistemological. Studies that systematically integrate these perspectives are still relatively limited, particularly in the context of the philosophy of religion in Indonesia. Furthermore, the dialogue between continental and analytical philosophical traditions often proceeds separately, thus lacking a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding mystical experiences (Peterson, 2022). Based on these conditions, this study seeks to develop a synthesis of Kierkegaard's religious existentialism, Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics, and Plantinga's reformed epistemology as a model for phenomenological justification for mystical experiences in the post-truth era. This approach was chosen because it can explain mystical experiences not only as subjective phenomena but also as forms of knowledge possessing their own epistemic legitimacy. Furthermore, this research will enrich this discourse through critical dialogue with the tradition of Islamic mysticism, particularly the concepts developed within Sufism. The presence of an Islamic perspective is expected to provide a new contribution to the development of contemporary religious philosophy, which has so far been dominated by Western thought.

Thus, this research is not only theoretically relevant in broadening understanding of the epistemology of mystical experience, but also has contextual significance in addressing the challenges of religiosity in the post-truth era. Amidst the fragmentation of knowledge and the crisis of truth authority, the study of the epistemic justification of mystical experience is crucial to demonstrate that religious experience can still be understood rationally without losing its spiritual and existential depth. This research is expected to contribute to the development of contemporary philosophy of religion while opening a broader space for dialogue between Western intellectual traditions and the treasures of Islamic mysticism.

The study of mystical experience is an important theme in contemporary philosophy of religion because it is directly related to the issue of religious epistemology, namely how humans gain knowledge of God and transcendent reality. In the development of modern philosophy, mystical experience is often positioned as a problematic form of experience because it cannot be empirically verified or proven through the rational methods commonly used in science. However, a number of thinkers in contemporary philosophy of religion have attempted to demonstrate that mystical experience has its own epistemic value that does not have to fully submit to the standards of modern evidentialism. Therefore, the study of "spirituality without evidence" is relevant to understanding how religious experience can be philosophically justified, even when not supported by objective evidence. One important foundation in the study of mystical experience comes from the phenomenological

approach to religion. Phenomenology seeks to understand religious experience as it is experienced by the subject, without first reducing it to psychological, sociological, or biological explanations. In his classic work, William James explained that religious experience is an individual's direct experience of something considered sacred, divine, or transcendent. According to James, mystical experiences have four main characteristics: they cannot be fully expressed through language (ineffability), they provide intuitive knowledge (noetic quality), they last for a relatively short time (transiency), and they are experienced passively by the subject (passivity). James's analysis has become the basis for many subsequent studies that view mystical experiences not simply as religious emotions but as sources of knowledge with profound existential meaning (Ghozali & Asrori, 2025).

The study of the phenomenology of religion then developed through the thinking of Rudolf Otto, who introduced the concept of mysterium tremendum et fascinans. Otto explained that religious experience is rooted in human encounters with the Holy, a reality that simultaneously evokes fear, awe, and fascination. This experience cannot be fully explained through rational categories because it contains non-rational elements that exceed human conceptual capabilities. Otto's concept makes an important contribution to understanding mystical experience as a direct encounter with a transcendent reality that cannot be reduced to ordinary psychological experiences. In contemporary philosophy of religion, discussions of mystical experience have increasingly developed through the approach of religious existentialism. A central figure in this tradition is Søren Kierkegaard, who rejected the dominance of rationalism in religious life. Kierkegaard argued that faith cannot be built solely through objective proof, but rather through the individual's existential involvement. In his concept of "subjective truth," he emphasized that the human relationship with God is a matter of existence that cannot be reduced to rational propositions. For Kierkegaard, religious experience derives its meaning not from scientific proof, but from its ability to profoundly transform an individual's life. This idea is highly relevant in the study of mystical experience because it provides a philosophical basis for the legitimacy of personal religious experience (Sufiani et al., 2025).

Paul Ricoeur further developed the existential approach through phenomenological hermeneutics. Ricoeur emphasized that religious experience is always mediated by symbols, metaphors, and narratives that develop within a tradition. In his view, symbols have the ability to reveal layers of meaning that cannot be reached by literal language. His famous statement, "the symbol gives rise to thought," suggests that mystical experiences must be understood through a continuous process of interpretation. Thus, mystical experiences are not merely individual experiences but also part of a network of meanings formed by religious communities and traditions. Ricoeur's approach is important because it helps explain how mystical experiences can be communicated and understood despite their inherently personal nature. On the other hand, the tradition of analytical philosophy has made a distinct contribution through the development of an epistemology of religion. One of the most influential figures in this field is Alvin Plantinga with his theory of Reformed Epistemology. Plantinga rejects the evidentialist view that states that every rational belief must be based on sufficient evidence. According to him, belief in God can be a proper basic belief, that is, a basic belief that does not require inferential proof to be considered rational. Through the concept of sensus divinitatis, Plantinga explains that humans have an innate capacity to recognize the existence of God. In the context of mystical experience, this theory provides epistemic justification that a person can rationally believe their spiritual experiences without having to objectively prove them to others (Anzaikhan, 2024).

Plantinga's view has gained widespread attention in contemporary philosophy of religion because it opens up space for the epistemic legitimacy of religious experience. Previously, many philosophers argued that religious belief lacked rationality because it lacked strong empirical evidence. However, reformed epistemology demonstrates that not all forms of knowledge require evidential proof. Some fundamental beliefs in everyday life, such as the existence of the external world or the existence of other minds, are accepted without rigorous formal proof. Similarly, mystical experiences can be viewed as a legitimate source of knowledge if they are generated by properly functioning cognitive capacities. In addition to Western perspectives, the study of mystical experience has also drawn significant contributions from the Islamic tradition of mysticism. In this context, the thought of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali is particularly relevant. After experiencing an intellectual and spiritual crisis, al-Ghazali concluded that true certainty is not only attained through reason but also through direct experience with God, known as kashf, or revelation. In his works, he asserted that spiritual experience provides a more profound form of knowledge than mere rational argumentation. This view shows that there is conformity with the phenomenological approach which places experience as the main source of religious understanding (Ashari et al., 2025).

The Sufi tradition was also enriched by the thoughts of Junayd al-Baghdadi and Ibn Arabi. Junayd explained mystical experiences through the concepts of fanā and baqā, namely the disappearance of human ego-consciousness and its continuation in divine consciousness. These experiences are ineffable and can only be understood directly by the individual experiencing them. Meanwhile, Ibn Arabi developed the concept of waḥdat

al-wujūd which emphasizes the existential unity of all reality with God. Interestingly, Ibn Arabi views uncertainty (ḥayra) not as a weakness of knowledge, but as an epistemic condition that allows humans to approach the infinite divine reality. This perspective bears similarities to Kierkegaard's idea of objective uncertainty as a fundamental condition of faith. Various contemporary studies show that mystical experiences are no longer understood solely as psychological or pathological phenomena. A number of studies in the philosophy of religion emphasize the importance of understanding mystical experiences as a form of consciousness that has its own structure and logic. The current debate no longer centers on the question of whether mystical experiences are objectively true or false, but rather how these experiences generate meaning, shape religious identity, and provide a basis for individual belief (Rohman, 2023).

However, differing views remain regarding the epistemic status of mystical experiences. Phenomenological and existential approaches emphasize the experiential and self-transformational dimensions, while analytical approaches focus more on the rational justification of religious beliefs. Some studies employ only one of these approaches, resulting in a partial understanding. Therefore, studies that integrate the perspectives of phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, and the epistemology of religion are needed to obtain a more comprehensive picture of mystical experiences. Based on the literature review above, it can be concluded that mystical experiences are complex and multidimensional phenomena. The thinking of William James and Rudolf Otto provides a phenomenological basis for understanding the characteristics of mystical experiences. Kierkegaard and Ricoeur demonstrate how these experiences acquire meaning through subjectivity and symbolic interpretation. Meanwhile, Plantinga offers an epistemic justification that allows religious experiences to be viewed as a source of rational knowledge. The tradition of Islamic Sufism, through al-Ghazali, Junayd, and Ibn Arabi, further enriches this discourse by demonstrating that mystical experiences have long been understood as a path to authentic spiritual knowledge. Thus, the study of spirituality without evidence is not only relevant to contemporary philosophy of religion, but also makes an important contribution to understanding the relationship between religious experience, knowledge, and belief amidst the complexities of modern life.

METHOD

This research is a library research with a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach. This approach was chosen because it is able to capture mystical experiences as phenomena of consciousness experienced directly by the subject, while simultaneously exploring layers of meaning mediated by symbols, language, and tradition. The data analysis technique is carried out in three stages. First, phenomenological reduction (epoché), which is an effort to temporarily suspend the theoretical assumptions and pre-understanding of the researcher so that the mystical experience can be captured as it appears in the subject's consciousness (Husserl, 1999). In this context, reports of mystical experiences from various traditions are treated as authentic data of consciousness, without first being judged as factually true or false. Second, hermeneutic interpretation, by applying the Ricoeurian method that emphasizes that symbols give us thought (le symbole donne à penser). Mystical symbols such as unification, disclosure (kashf), and fana are not reduced to literal propositions, but are interpreted continuously within the context of their traditions and interpretive communities. Third, a comparative analysis between figures, which compares the thoughts of Kierkegaard, Ricoeur, and Plantinga to find common ground and a coherent synthesis in providing epistemic justification for mystical experiences.

The selection of primary and secondary texts was done purposively. Primary texts include the major works of Kierkegaard (Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Fear and Trembling), Ricoeur (The Symbolism of Evil, Oneself as Another), and Plantinga (Warranted Christian Belief). Secondary texts include interpretive and critical works by commentators, as well as relevant literature on Islamic mysticism. All texts were analyzed with attention to the historical-intellectual context of each thinker, to avoid anachronistic readings (Miles et al., 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Deconstruction of the Modern Subject: From Cogito to Existence

Before delving into the phenomenology of mystical experience, we must understand what contemporary philosophy of religion rejects: the Cartesian cognitive subject. René Descartes laid the foundations of modernity with cogito ergo sum, where the certainty of knowledge begins with methodical doubt and mathematically verifiable claims. As a result, personal, historical, and transcendent religious faith is forced into a realm of proof that is foreign to it. Worse still, Immanuel Kant later fenced off the realm of faith (Glauben) from the realm of knowledge (Wissen), while still subjecting morality to the rational categorical imperative. In his critique of

speculative metaphysics, Kant argued that God, the soul, and freedom are practical postulates necessary for morality, not objects of theoretical knowledge. This saved faith from the onslaught of skepticism, but simultaneously exiled God to a practical realm separate from objective reality. Consequently, mystical experiences that claim to be direct encounters with the Divine have no place in the Kantian map of knowledge.

This is where contemporary philosophy of religion makes what might be called a methodological turn. Instead of asking, "Is God provable?", it asks, "What does belief in God do to human existence?" or "Under what mental conditions is one justified in believing without proof?" These two questions lead us to Kierkegaard's existentialism and Plantinga's reformed epistemology, both of which are key instruments for a more just understanding of mystical experience (Walsh, 2018). This deconstruction of the Cartesian subject is not merely an academic exercise, but a fundamental epistemological liberation. When the solitary, auto-transparent cogito is replaced by a fragile, limited, and constantly thrown-into-the-world existence, mystical experience regains its rightful place. It no longer has to appear as a suspect, always in need of verification by the tribunal of objective reason. Instead, it presents itself as an event that transforms one's way of being in the world. Within this new framework, the critical question shifts from, "Is this mystical experience factually real?" to "What does this mystical experience do to the totality of the subject's existence?" This second question cannot be answered with laboratory experiments or statistical surveys, but rather with a phenomenological analysis that is sensitive to the nuances of religious consciousness and a hermeneutic that is capable of excavating the layers of meaning behind mystical symbols.

Religious Existentialism: Mystical Experience as Radical Subjectivity

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), often called the father of existentialism, wrote under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus that subjectivity is truth. In his Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard asserted that subjective truth is an ethical-religious truth that does not consist of propositions or perceptions of the external world, but rather of introspection, experience, and especially one's relationship with God. For him, an objectively verifiable God is not a living God, but an intellectual idol. True faith is born from a leap taken in total uncertainty. As he wrote: Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite desire of the innermost being of the individual and objective uncertainty. If I were able to grasp God objectively, I would not believe, but precisely because I cannot do so, I must believe (Kierkegaard, 1992).

This statement has direct implications for our understanding of mystical experience. If mystical experience is a moment of encounter with the Divine, then it can never be fully captured by a network of objective propositions. Kierkegaard formulated three stages of existence: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. The religious stage, illustrated by the story of Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac, is the realm where the individual stands alone before God in fear and trembling. Abraham cannot justify his actions in universal ethical terms; he only has a private relationship with God that transcends rationality. In the context of mystical experience, this means that the person experiencing union with God cannot fully explain their experience to others. This is not because they are reluctant, but because public language and logic are not designed to capture such a reality. Kierkegaard asserts that faith is an infinite passion invested in objective uncertainty. The greater the objective uncertainty, the more intense the subjective passion required. This radically reverses modern logic: uncertainty is not a weakness of faith, but rather its very condition (Tukiran, 2026). For a mystic, it is precisely when objective evidence is least available that his spiritual desire is most pure and authentic.

Sylvia Walsh, in her book Kierkegaard and Religion (Cambridge University Press, 2018), explains that for Kierkegaard, personality, character, and virtue are central to religious life. Faith is never simply the acceptance of doctrine, but rather an existential transformation of the whole self. This is crucial to distinguishing authentic mystical experience from mere superficial psychological sensations. A true mystical experience is not a momentary euphoria, but rather a fundamental shift in one's way of being in the world (Walsh, 2018). Expanding on Kierkegaard's thinking, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) developed a phenomenological hermeneutic that emphasizes the role of symbols and narratives in religious understanding. Ricoeur famously stated: "The symbol gives us thought" (*le symbole donne à penser*). Religious symbols such as sin, salvation, forgiveness, and the sacred cannot be reduced to literal propositions but must be interpreted continuously. Mystical experiences, in other words, are not raw data that can be directly interpreted, but are always mediated by the symbols and narratives available in the tradition. A Christian mystic and a Muslim Sufi may experience the same reality, but they will describe it differently because of their different symbolic apparatuses (Ricoeur, 1992).

Ricoeur also developed a concept of the self that is never completely closed or transparent. The self can only be understood through a hermeneutics of the self, which involves interpreting texts, actions, and the testimonies of

others. In the context of mystical experience, testimony becomes an important epistemic category. While one cannot objectively prove one's mystical experience, one can provide authentic testimony. This testimony is not merely a factual report, but rather an offer of interpretation that invites others to share in its meaning. Ricoeur's thinking is highly relevant in responding to criticisms that religious existentialism lapses into arbitrary subjectivism. Ricoeur shows that subjectivity is not a closed privation, but is always open to symbols, narratives, and traditions that transcend the individual. Mystical experience, however personal, always occurs in an intersubjective space already imbued with collective meanings (Ricoeur, 1967).

Dialogue with the Tradition of Islamic Sufism

A discussion of mystical experience in contemporary philosophy of religion would be incomplete without touching on the rich treasury of Islamic mysticism, its rich source of spiritual experience and epistemological reflection. The Sufi tradition offers a unique perspective that both aligns with and enriches the framework established by Kierkegaard, Ricoeur, and Plantinga. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111), one of the most influential figures in the history of Islamic thought, experienced a profound spiritual crisis and ultimately found certainty through the path of Sufism. Al-Ghazali asserted that certainty can only be achieved through inner experience, not syllogistic reasoning. For him, the path of the Sufis offers direct experience comparable to that of the prophets, thus providing irrefutable proof of religious truths. Al-Ghazali concluded that Sufis alone are on the true path to God. The epistemology of kashf (revelation) he developed asserts that knowledge of God is not achieved solely through reason, but through purification of the soul and direct spiritual experience (Al-Ghazali, 1997).

Meanwhile, Junayd al-Baghdadi (d. 910), known as the father of moderate Sufism, developed an understanding of mystical experience as fanā (self-extinction) and baqā (eternity in God). In the experience of tawḥIn the highest īd, a mystic realizes that he is completely lost from himself, and with his loss of himself, he is present in God. Junayd emphasized that mystical experience is inexpressible and incommunicable, unspeakable and incommunicable. Nevertheless, he attempted to formulate an Arabic language that could accurately describe mystical experience without exaggeration or overreach (Al-Baghdādī, 1969). Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), known as the Great Teacher (al-Shaykh al-Akbar), took Islamic mysticism to a higher philosophical level with the concept of waḥdat al-wujūd (unity of being). For him, uncertainty (ḥayra) actually has a higher epistemological value than certainty, because certainty only concerns the apparent reality, while uncertainty opens the way for the revelation of a deeper reality. Ibn Arabi developed a language of unsaying that was born from tension and paradox in an attempt to articulate the transcendent nature of the unspeakable (Arabi & Muhyiddin, 1980).

This dialogue with the Sufi tradition enriches the framework of phenomenological justification offered by this article in several ways. First, al-Ghazali provides a concrete example of how mystical experience—which he calls dhawq (direct tasting)—becomes the basis of existential certainty that transcends philosophical doubt. Second, Junayd shows that mystical experience, although private and ineffable, can still be communicated indirectly through symbols and careful language. Third, Ibn Arabi offers the radical perspective that uncertainty is not a weakness but a superior epistemic condition, a view that aligns with Kierkegaard's thesis of infinite desire within objective uncertainty. Thus, the Islamic Sufi tradition serves not only as a point of comparison but also as an equal dialogue partner in the effort to understand the epistemic status of mystical experience (Kholil, 2019). Its presence in this discourse demonstrates that the problem of justifying mystical experience is not the monopoly of Western philosophy, but rather a universal issue that has been addressed by various religious traditions with their own richness and depth.

Reformed Epistemology: Mystical Experience as a Proper Foundational Belief

In contrast to the phenomenological-existential approach of the continental tradition, the American tradition of analytical philosophy has produced a different but complementary response to the epistemic problem of faith. Alvin Plantinga (b. 1932), one of the most influential philosophers of religion of the 20th century, developed what is known as Reformed Epistemology (Plantinga, 2000). The term Reformed refers to the Reformed (Calvinist) theological tradition, but Plantinga's use is philosophical, not sectarian, theological. At the heart of Reformed epistemology is the thesis that belief in God can be rationally justified without the need for evidence or argument. Plantinga rejects evidentialism, the belief that every rational belief must be supported by sufficient evidence.

In his landmark work, Warranted Christian Belief (2000), Plantinga developed a theory of warrant—the quality that distinguishes true belief from belief that is merely true. A belief has warrant if it is generated by properly functioning cognitive faculties in a suitably designed environment. Plantinga argued that belief in God can be considered a properly basic belief, just as belief in the existence of the external world, the past, or the

minds of other people. The application of this theory to mystical experience is quite clear. If someone experiences what they believe to be an encounter with God, and if that experience is generated by a properly functioning sensus divinitatis (sense of the divine), then the resulting belief has warrant. It requires no additional external evidence (Bakhtiar, 2017). The sensus divinitatis is the faculty or cognitive mechanism that, in various situations, generates in us belief in God; theistic belief generated in this way, furthermore, is properly basic with respect to warrant. Plantinga adapts Calvin's concept of sensus divinitatis as the disposition to believe in God—to love, trust, and behold His beauty and glory. For mystical experiences, this argument is even stronger. A mystic experiencing contemplative ecstasy or union with the Divine can directly form the belief that God is real, that he or she has come into contact with the Ultimate Reality. This belief requires no inference from other beliefs. It is fundamental to the person's epistemic structure (Hifni et al., 2025).

Plantinga's view has radical consequences. Discussions about "proof" of God's existence become irrelevant to justifying theistic belief. As long as the sensus divinitatis functions properly, the beliefs it generates are warranted. This does not mean that theistic arguments are useless. They can help "pave the way" for faith or answer intellectual objections, but they are not the epistemic foundation of faith itself. Similarly, mystical experience does not require justification from philosophical arguments about God. It has its own justification (Peterson et al., 2021). Michael Peterson and his colleagues, in their work "Reason and Religious Belief," note that reformed epistemology has significantly changed the landscape of analytic philosophy of religion. Before Plantinga, the dominance of evidentialism led many philosophers to dismiss religious belief as irrational. Plantinga's work opened up space for the possibility of a rationality of faith independent of classical arguments. For the study of mystical experience, this is good news: mystical experience need not be forced into an unfamiliar evidential framework (Peterson, 2022).

Synthesis, Contemporary Relevance, and Limitations

Both religious existentialism and Reformed epistemology reject strong evidentialism, which demands objective evidence to justify faith. However, they differ significantly in their approaches. Religious existentialism employs phenomenological and hermeneutic methods, focusing on subjectivity, passion, and decision-making. Reformed epistemology utilizes analytic and epistemic methods, focusing on cognitive mechanisms and warrant. Regarding the study of mystical experience, these two approaches actually complement one another. Religious existentialism offers a rich description of what occurs within the subject when encountering transcendent reality; it explains why mystical experiences are often paradoxical, ineffable, and personally transformative. Reformed epistemology provides an epistemic justification for why beliefs arising from mystical experiences can be considered rational, even in the absence of objective evidence. The Islamic Sufi tradition—with its concepts of *kashf*, *fana*, and *ḥayra*—enriches both approaches by offering concrete, non-Western examples of how mystical experiences are understood, lived out, and justified within a vibrant spiritual community (Mulyani, 2022).

Of course, these approaches face challenges. Religious existentialism is vulnerable to the critique of relativism. If truth is entirely subjective, how can we distinguish authentic mystical experience from psychotic delusion? Kierkegaard himself did not seek relativism; for him, subjective truth remains tied to the transcendent Absolute. But critics such as Alasdair MacIntyre argue that Kierkegaard's project is ultimately incoherent because it fails to provide criteria for distinguishing authentic faith from delusion. Reformed epistemology faces similar criticisms. Michael Martin and J.L. Mackie argue that accepting religious belief as a proper basic belief opens the door to unbridled epistemic relativism. Plantinga responds that a claim to be a proper basic belief only if it is generated by properly functioning cognitive faculties. Critics, however, point out that this presupposes a prior theistic commitment to determining what is "properly functioning" within God's design. Nevertheless, these objections do not invalidate the project as a whole. This approach claims not that all mystical experiences are automatically true, but rather that a mystical experience cannot be disqualified simply because it lacks objective evidence. Each case must be assessed individually, taking into account its internal coherence, the moral integrity of the experiencer, and its consistency with tradition and community (Walsh, 2018).

In the post-truth era, the contributions of these approaches are increasingly relevant. We witness how truth claims move in the public sphere without much reliance on objective facts. Contemporary philosophy of religion reminds us that there are dimensions of truth that cannot be reduced to facts: the truth about how to live, what is worth striving for, and to whom we are committed. Mystical experience is one of the most intense forms of such truth-seeking. However, it is important to emphasize that the phenomenological justification for mystical experience is not a license for anti-intellectualism or blind fideism. Rather, it is an invitation to expand our understanding of rationality itself. Rationality does not always have to take the form of publicly testable

propositional proof. There are other forms of rationality based on coherence, integrity, openness to tradition, and a willingness to be corrected by the community (Peterson et al., 2021).

The synthesis of religious existentialism, Ricoeur's hermeneutics, reformed epistemology, and the insights of Islamic Sufism opens up the possibility of a new methodology in the study of religion that no longer imposes a rigid dichotomy between insider and outsider. With the proposed framework, researchers can adopt a third position: a critical hermeneutics that acknowledges the authority of subjective experience while simultaneously testing it against a set of public criteria. These criteria include: (a) the internal coherence of the mystical narrative itself, (b) its consistency with the deposit of faith of the tradition in question, (c) its transformative impact on the subject's moral and relational behavior, and (d) the subject's openness to correction from the interpretive community. Thus, spirituality without evidence does not mean spirituality without standards; on the contrary, it possesses its own logic of rationality that is no less rigorous, but of a different kind (Peterson, 2022).

The results of this study indicate that mystical experiences cannot be adequately understood if measured solely using modern epistemological standards that emphasize objectivity, empirical verification, and rational proof. Through a synthesis of the thoughts of Søren Kierkegaard, Paul Ricoeur, and Alvin Plantinga, as well as a dialogue with the Islamic Sufi tradition, this study finds that mystical experiences possess a distinctive form of rationality and justification mechanism. These findings also demonstrate a paradigm shift in contemporary philosophy of religion, from the search for objective evidence about God to an understanding of how humans experience, interpret, and justify their relationship with the Transcendent. One of the main findings of this study is that a critique of the modern Cartesian subject is a crucial starting point in understanding mystical experiences. The modern philosophical tradition, rooted in Descartes' cogito, places reason as the primary source of certainty in knowledge. Consequently, any form of experience that cannot be objectively verified tends to be considered less valid or even irrational. Within such a framework, mystical experiences are always on the defensive because they are personal, irreproducible, and often transcend conceptual language (Al-Ghazali, 2004). Research shows that this approach actually limits our understanding of religious experience. Mystical experiences cannot be reduced to objects to be proven, as are objects in the natural sciences. Instead, they are more accurately understood as existential events that transform how a person interprets themselves, the world, and their relationship with God.

In this context, Kierkegaard's thought makes a significant contribution. His concept of "subjective truth" suggests that religious truth lies not in objective certainty, but rather in the individual's existential involvement. Research findings demonstrate that mystical experiences gain legitimacy not because they can be logically proven, but because they produce a real transformation in the subject's life. This aligns with Kierkegaard's view that faith is not the result of perfect rational argumentation, but rather arises from existential decisions made in situations of uncertainty. Thus, mystical experience can be understood as the most radical form of religious subjectivity, in which individuals experience a direct relationship with God without the intermediary of a fully adequate rational system. Analysis of Kierkegaard's thought also shows that uncertainty is not a weakness in religious experience, but rather a prerequisite for the existence of faith itself. In the modern paradigm, certainty is considered a sign of the validity of knowledge. However, this research finds that in mystical experiences, uncertainty actually opens up space for a deeper existential involvement. A mystic does not believe because he has perfect proof of God, but because he experiences God's presence in his inner life (Al-Ghazali, 1997). Therefore, mystical experiences cannot be judged solely on the basis of the presence or absence of objective evidence, but also on the basis of their impact on the individual's life orientation, character, and moral actions.

These findings are reinforced by Paul Ricoeur's thinking, which emphasizes the hermeneutical dimension of religious experience. Research shows that mystical experiences never exist as completely pure experiences or free from interpretation. Every mystical experience is always mediated by symbols, language, narratives, and traditions that shape how a person understands spiritual reality. In other words, mystical experiences are not only experienced but also interpreted. This is where Ricoeur's concept that symbols "give us thoughts" becomes relevant. Religious symbols do not simply depict reality but also open up new possibilities for meaning that enable humans to understand themselves and the world more deeply. This analysis has important implications for the study of mystical experiences. A frequent criticism of mystical experiences is their subjective and unverifiable nature. However, research findings show that subjectivity is not always synonymous with relativism. Through Ricoeur's hermeneutics, subjectivity is understood as a space of interpretation that is always connected to tradition, community, and collective symbols (Ricoeur, 1976). Therefore, mystical experiences do not stand alone as closed, private experiences but always possess an intersubjective dimension. A mystic's testimony can be understood and evaluated by his or her community through shared symbols and narratives. Thus, mystical experiences remain open to dialogue with others even if they cannot be empirically proven.

The research also shows that Alvin Plantinga's reformed epistemology provides a strong epistemic foundation for mystical experiences. While Kierkegaard and Ricoeur primarily explain the existential and interpretive dimensions of mystical experiences, Plantinga explains why these experiences can be considered rational. The concept of properly basic belief allows religious belief to be understood as a form of knowledge that does not require inferential proof from other beliefs. In the context of mystical experiences, a person can be justified in believing that they have experienced God's presence without first having to construct a complex philosophical argument. This finding is significant because it challenges the dominance of evidentialism in modern philosophy of religion. Evidentialism assumes that a belief can only be considered rational if supported by sufficient evidence. However, this research shows that many basic human beliefs are not actually built on formal evidence. Belief in the existence of the external world, memories of the past, or the existence of other people's minds is often accepted as basic without rigorous proof. Within the same framework, mystical experiences can be a legitimate basis for the formation of religious beliefs. Through the concept of sensus divinitatis, Plantinga explains that humans possess a cognitive capacity that allows them to directly recognize divine reality (Plantinga, 2000). Therefore, mystical experiences need not be considered a form of irrationality simply because they do not meet the standards of scientific proof.

Dialogue with the Islamic Sufi tradition further enriches the results of this research. The findings indicate that the ideas developed by Kierkegaard, Ricoeur, and Plantinga have strong resonance with the thought of classical Sufis. The experience of kashf in al-Ghazali's thought, for example, demonstrates that knowledge of God is not only obtained through reason, but also through direct spiritual experience. This strengthens the research thesis that there is a form of knowledge that cannot be reduced to mere discursive reasoning. Al-Ghazali even positions spiritual experience as a source of deeper certainty than philosophical argumentation. Similarly, the concepts of fanā and baqā developed by Junayd al-Baghdadi show that mystical experience involves a profound existential transformation. This experience is not merely a temporary emotional experience, but a fundamental shift in how one understands oneself and God. These findings strengthen Kierkegaard's argument regarding the importance of existential transformation as an indicator of the authenticity of religious experience. Authentic mystical experience always results in a change in life orientation, not just a momentary spiritual sensation (Nurdiana, 2025).

Another important contribution comes from Ibn Arabi's thoughts onḥayra, or awe born of uncertainty. The research findings suggest an interesting alignment between this concept and Kierkegaard's notion of objective uncertainty. Both reject the view that rational certainty is the highest form of knowledge. Instead, they demonstrate that openness to mystery allows humans to experience a deeper reality than ordinary rational concepts can reach. In the context of mystical experiences, uncertainty is not a sign of epistemic weakness, but rather an acknowledgment of human limitations in the face of the Infinite. However, this research also identified several challenges that require attention. Existential and phenomenological approaches risk being accused of subjectivism if they lack clear evaluation criteria (Gusman et al., 2025). If every religious experience is deemed true simply because it is experienced sincerely, it will be difficult to distinguish between authentic mystical experiences and those stemming from psychological disorders or delusions. Similarly, reformed epistemology faces criticism for allowing conflicting beliefs to claim equal rational status.

However, the research findings suggest that these criticisms can be addressed through a critical hermeneutical approach. Mystical experiences should not be accepted without evaluation, but they should also not be rejected simply because they lack objective evidence. Evaluation can be conducted through several indicators, such as the experience's internal coherence, its consistency with the underlying religious tradition, its impact on the individual's moral life, and its openness to dialogue and community correction. Thus, mystical experiences can still be assessed rationally without being reduced to objects of scientific verification. The results of this study indicate that mystical experiences have legitimate epistemic justification through a combination of existential, hermeneutical, and epistemological approaches. The synthesis of the thoughts of Kierkegaard, Ricoeur, Plantinga, and the Islamic Sufi tradition demonstrates that mystical experiences are not irrational phenomena that should be excluded from academic discourse, but rather a form of religious knowledge with its own logic and justification mechanisms. These findings are highly relevant in the post-truth era, when society faces a crisis of knowledge authority and the fragmentation of truth claims. In this context, contemporary philosophy of religion offers the perspective that rationality is not always synonymous with empirical proof, but also encompasses existential, interpretive, and spiritual dimensions that profoundly shape human life. Thus, mystical experience can be understood as one way for humans to recognize reality, make sense of existence, and build a relationship with the Transcendent in a rational and authentic way.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary philosophy of religion has moved far beyond the mere attempt to "prove God." Religious existentialism and reformed epistemology, while differing methodologically and philosophically, both offer rich responses to the epistemological and existential challenges of faith in the modern era. Both liberate faith from the undue demands of objective evidence, without falling into irrationalism or reckless subjectivism. The implications of the study of mystical experience are significant. Mystical experience no longer needs to be forced into a framework of evidence alien to it. It can be understood as a legitimate mode of knowledge with its own internal logic. This logic is neither inductive nor deductive, but rather existential and hermeneutic. It deals not with "Does God exist?" as a theoretical hypothesis, but with "What does it mean for me to stand before the Divine?" as a question of meaning and commitment. The main contribution of this article is the availability of a phenomenological justification model for mystical experience that synthesizes three currents of thought: Kierkegaard's existentialism, Ricoeur's hermeneutics, and Plantinga's Reformed epistemology, enriching it with dialogue from the Islamic Sufi tradition. This model demonstrates that mystical experience possesses internal coherence, existential authenticity, and epistemic justification that is no less valid than other modes of knowledge. Further research is needed to test this model on concrete cases of mystical experience from various traditions, develop more operational criteria for distinguishing authentic experience from delusion, and deepen the dialogue with other non-Western mystical traditions. Integrating insights from the psychology of religion and cognitive science can also enrich our understanding of the mechanisms behind mystical experience without reducing it to a mere biological epiphenomenon. Thus, amid the excitement of the post-truth era, which often dangerously conflates fact with opinion, this phenomenological-epistemic justification offers a more mature solution. Rather than succumbing to relativism or hiding behind anti-intellectual fideism, we are invited to critically distinguish between authentic and false mystical claims through tests of coherence, existential transformation, and public witness within the traditional community. Mystical experience no longer has to appear as a defensive "spirituality without evidence," but can instead present itself as a "critically lived spirituality" while maintaining its own internal logos.

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