Over the centuries, humankind has exponentially expanded our understanding of science, technology, and medicine. But what about the spiritual world that surrounds us?

Could the next great frontier be the unseen world of spiritual realities that surround us?

*Our **Expanding Possibilities Series** is a spotlight interview with leading thinkers on their work in relation to our ongoing quest for new spiritual information.*

Dr. Ali Qadir is Professor of Sociology and head of the Tampere research group on Religion & Society at Tampere University, Finland, where he leads a project on Mystics in Society, supported by Kone Foundation. He directs the Program in the Study of Mysticism, supported by Templeton Religion Trust, where he is also a member of the Board of Advisors.

Q: Our founder, John Templeton, thought a lot about using the tools of science for spiritual discovery. How would you say your work aligns with that goal?

As a religious studies scholar and sociologist, most of my research has been dedicated to the idea that we can empirically understand what spiritual reality means and does in

our lives and societies. Recently, the social sciences and humanities have developed rigorous tools of empirical inquiry that can reveal new aspects of that Big Question in a way that meets Sir John's exacting standards.

The Program in the Study of Mysticism seeks to bring together a wide variety of such systematic enquiries with a metaphysical grasp of mystical union and immediate presence of Divine or Ultimate Reality. The nature of mysticism means we can never fully unpack what that union amounts to, and perhaps such ambiguity is inherent to the architecture of Ultimate Reality. Yet we can get much further along that vanishing point to understand what mysticism is and what mystics do. For instance, our team in Tampere runs a meticulous, multidisciplinary project to uncover how mystics have contributed to human flourishing around the world.

Q: John Templeton believed we knew less than 1% of the spiritual realities that surround us. Are we making progress on this front? And if so, how?

The nature of spiritual reality means we may never reach 100%, yet we don't need to stay at 1%. Over the past couple of decades, there has been a notable uptick of interest in spirituality. The Templeton philanthropies have a lot to do with that. This growing interest, perhaps we may call it a re-sacralization, bodes well for the future of spiritual research. Marrying rigorous, metaphysical and scientific enquiries is the way forward to map uncharted, spiritual domains.

The study of mysticism is a great example. Our landscaping survey shows that PRISM constitutes the single largest investment in the general and comparative study of mysticism ever made. The 18 projects funded under this program are already producing vast information about mysticism across the world's five major religious traditions, not to mention multiplier effects from collaboration among the projects. And Templeton Religion Trust has committed to supporting further, large projects at least over the coming three years. All of this amounts to a considerable body of new knowledge about one of the Biggest Questions out there: what does it mean to "know" Divine or Ultimate Reality? That is, what state of consciousness do mystics live in?

A crucial point that Sir John recognized is that spiritual reality is not an abstract concept, but is utterly immanent and matters in our lives. In PRISM, we are finding that mystics through the ages have not only created great works of philosophy and art, but have served the neediest, brought peace, built bridges across religions, and protected the environment. It seems mystical consciousness of spiritual reality is very practical!

The key for the future is to inspire early career scientists and thinkers around the world, to show them that dedicated mapping of spiritual reality is a respected and well-funded career choice as well as a contribution to human civilization.

Q: In his book *The Humble Approach*, John Templeton wrote, "Humility is a gateway to greater understanding." How do you see humility as a catalyst to new spiritual information?

For mystics in all parts of the world and throughout history, humility is the absolute core, a prerequisite to any form of Divine presence or experience. Mystical accounts bear out that submitting to the Universal Absolute, recognizing it is always beyond our understanding, is key to some level of "heart knowledge." Mystical union almost always means annihilation of the ego. Empirical research, including in PRISM, also shows that mystics of all religions – from the prophets and founders to those who experience Divine Presence – are universally humble and generally tend to serve humanity tirelessly. They are true exemplars and we need more research to appreciate how their character and service are driven by mystical experience.

Q: Guided by John Templeton's vision, TRT aims to expand what we know about spirituality and push into undiscovered territory. What excites you about the potential of new spiritual breakthroughs?

I subscribe to Sir John's feeling that we live in an era of unprecedented opportunities and a wealth of knowledge. What excites me today is the new wave of interest away from materialist, physicalist paradigms that reduce all of reality to visible surfaces. Science is being redefined, from biochemistry to physics to sociology, and uniting with rigorous metaphysics. These new approaches can tackle topics like universal consciousness, Pure Unlimited Love, and what Sir John called "heart knowledge." Mysticism centers on precisely such topics. The next frontier is designing methodologies to understand how mystics have grasped these domains and what their experience of Divine or Ultimate Reality means for a life well lived. Perhaps what is most exciting to me is that such breakthroughs into spiritual reality might just be the solutions we need to address the crises facing us today.

GRANTEE STORIES

Studying Mysticism as Theory, Practice and Experience

Across cultures and centuries, individuals have reported moments of profound, indescribable connection with ultimate reality - mystical experiences at the heart of

religion, yet among its least understood dimensions. Such transendent experience of presense and its life-altering effects, which we term mystical, are consistent thread in religions everywhere. With new research methodologies and techniques at hand, especially in the social sciences and humanities, we can learn more about mystics, in what ways their consciousness has been transformed, and how that impacts society.

PRISM explores mysticism as a serious, multi-disciplinary field of study through global collaboration, original research, and public engagement.

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