

Varieties of Mystical Experience and its Relevance Today

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The word ‘mysticism’ has many uses. It has often been associated with such things as visions, spiritualism, clairvoyance, mediumship, shamanism, and more recently with out-of-body and near-death experiences. I am using it here to refer initially to special experiences which in the Christian tradition imply a special and rare experience of one’s relationship to God, but more recently it has been used more widely to refer to feelings of oneness, ecstasy, and timelessness beyond all words. And while in our secular times it has often been dismissed as outdated nonsense, or even as a kind of mental disorder, it has more recently widened out to include a variety of altered states of consciousness, and to be an object of both spiritual and scientific interest.

In the Christian tradition mysticism derives from various ancient sources, but in particular from the 6th century writings of so-called Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. But it was in the late Middle Ages (13th-16th centuries) that there emerged what is sometimes called the ‘golden age’ of mysticism. This was a period of ecclesiastical expansion in Europe, involving the proliferation of religious orders, female as well as male, including some devoted exclusively to prayer and contemplation. But it was also a time of political upheaval, wars and plagues, as well conflicts of doctrine and authority within the church.

Well-known individuals associated with this movement include Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart,

Catherine of Sienna, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila: “...*the soul is conscious that it is fainting almost completely in a kind of swoon with a very great calm and joy*”. Many were elevated to sainthood, and in addition to their notable spiritual exploits and writings, many of them were actively involved with the public aspects of church life and politics. Conflict with church authorities, however, was not unknown over matters of orthodoxy and sometimes their writings provoked suspicion of heresy. Meister Eckhart’s comment that “*God and I are one in knowledge*” might well raise inquisitorial eyebrows. But on the whole they constituted through their personal influence and writings a significant stimulus to the spiritual life of the church.

Somewhat outside the monastic establishment there also emerged in that period a more informal exploration of new kinds of personal spirituality associated with the so-called *Devotio Moderna* movement of that period, usually linked to spiritual writings such as *The Imitation of Christ* and *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Some, such as Julian of Norwich (a woman), spent their lives in solitary prayer in hermitages, though not without regular contacts with the outside world.

Poetry, nature and mysticism:

Following the 16th century Reformation, mysticism began to take a variety of forms outside of the ecclesiastical domain. This was very evident in the poetic tradition in England during the late 16th and early 17th centuries which encouraged individuals to give expression in poetic form to mystical and related experiences. Well-known names include John Donne, Henry Vaughan: “*I saw*

Eternity the other night Like a great Ring of pure and endless light", Richard Crashaw, George Herbert and Thomas Traherne: "You will never see the world aright until the sea itself floweth in your veins". An element of nature mysticism begins to enter the expressive repertoire here, though the Mediaeval mystics often made use of such devices in attempts to express the inexpressible.

William Blake, greatly influenced by the 18th century Danish mystic and scientist Emanuel Swedenborg, was a visionary and the possessor of a powerful imagination. He believed that whatever was divine in God must be divine in man. He expressed his visions through poetry which was a powerful influence on the Romantic movement: "*To see a World in a Grain of Sand And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, And Eternity in an hour*".

William Wordsworth was gifted from an early age with powerful mystical feelings and visions, especially in relation to the natural world, and which clearly had something of the quality of a divine revelation in lines like: "*One impulse from the vernal wood teaches us more of God and of man than all the sages can*", or in his famous Tintern Abbey poem: "*I have felt A presence that disturbs me with the joy Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime Of something far more deeply interfused*".

Another great nature poet and mystic in the nineteenth century was Richard Jeffries, a simple Wiltshire farmer: "*It is eternity now. I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine; I am in it as the butterfly in the light-laden air. Nothing is to come; it is now. Now is eternity; now is the immortal life*".

It is important to note here that scientists are not necessarily hostile to mysticism, and they often give voice to mystical experiences – eg Albert Einstein: “*The finest emotion of which we are capable is the mystic emotion. Herein lies the germ of all art and all true science*”.

This leads us on to William James who in his book of 1902, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, was one of the first to approach typically mystical experiences from a scientific and psychological point of view. While he was open to typically religious interpretations, at the same time he saw mystical experiences as contributing to an understanding of the different levels of human consciousness, and was one of the first to draw attention to the connections between Christian and traditional Indian mystical practices.

He identified mysticism in terms of four main characteristics: 1. Ineffability, beyond language, 2. Noetic quality, certainty, 3. Transiency, quickly passes though might change your life, 4. Passivity, cannot be forced. Later studies of mysticism have added: 5. Oneness with God or nature or the universe, 6. Timelessness, 7. Ecstasy, 8. Awakening.

The connection between the spiritual traditions of East and West was being explored by a number of thinkers in the early twentieth century. One of these was Aldous Huxley. In his book *The Perennial Philosophy*, published in 1946, he quoted extracts from the writings of hundreds of mystics from a variety of cultures and ages, East as well as West, and argued that the overall similarity of

these experiences showed that mystical experiences were a world-wide, perennial expression of the universality of religious experience.

Huxley was perhaps better known for his interest in the mystical potential of psychedelic drugs. In his book *The Doors of Perception* (a quote from Blake: *If the doors of perception were cleansed we would see everything as it is, infinite*) he described how, under medical supervision, he took a dose of mescaline which gave him some very intense sensations, but, to his disappointment, failed to induce the hoped-for mystical vision. The relationship between religious experience and drugs was not at all new of course, but its influence on the New Age movement of the 1960s was considerable, especially with the latter's interest in exploring altered states of consciousness and varieties of spiritual experience, especially from the exotic cultures of the East.

The drug culture took its course, and was to some extent taken over by medical research, but the interest in mystical experience and in associated spiritual practices has expanded and proliferated up to our own time. One manifestation of this was the foundation in 1969 of the Religious Experience Research Centre at Oxford, now located at Trinity St David's College in Lampeter. It was initiated by the biologist Professor Alister Hardy. He had experienced mystical episodes since his youth, and wanted to find out if these were common amongst the population at large, so he embarked on an ambitious survey and was surprised to discover that such experiences were significantly widespread among the general population. He and his successors at the Centre have continued these investigations over a number of years, and similar

results from similar kinds of surveys conducted at other universities in the UK and the USA have been obtained.

This current interest is evident in a variety of contexts, perhaps due to what the Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor called “the massive subjective turn in modern culture”, and also in relation to a widespread interest in personal spiritual development and self-cultivation. This has often focused on practices such as meditation, mindfulness, yoga and tai-chi, and interest has been taken in altered states of consciousness such as near death experiences. In a more traditional manner it may also be found in a revival of something like the *Devotio Moderna* movement of the late Middle Ages, a personal, non-institutional form of spirituality. A good example of this is the Julian Meetings, named after the Norwich hermit, founded in 1973, now with over 300 such silent prayer groups.