

Four Faiths (Part 3): Mysticism

Rev. Mark Hayes

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Today we continue our exploration of different theological or faith paths that may fall within the framework of liberal religion, based on the “Four Faiths” described in Fred Campbell’s *Religious Integrity for Everyone*. We have so far talked about the paths of Humanism and Naturalism, and in a couple of weeks we’ll consider Theism. Today’s path *du jour* is Mysticism. In Campbell’s words, mysticism is “The faith of human beings who experience a ‘union with the transcendent.’ In secular culture, mystics know that the sciences do not deal with this kind of experience which is so strong or occurs frequently enough that it cannot be denied.”

I’d like to start this morning by giving you some general background and some various definitions and descriptions of mysticism. Then I’ll consider the relationship between mysticism and Unitarian Universalism.

A first observation I’d like to make is that, like the other faith paths we’ve considered, mysticism cuts across all religions. There are Christian mystics; there are Jewish mystics; there are Muslim mystics; there are Hindu mystics, and so on. Furthermore, it seems to me that mysticism also cuts across the boundaries of the other faith paths that we’ve looked at. That is, it is not hard for me to imagine a mystical humanist or a mystical naturalist.

Mysticism, at its heart, is really about a certain kind of religious experience, independent of any particular religious content. Of course, in practice, mystical experience does get caught up with particular religious formulations, but that has more to do with the interpretive framework used to understand and explain the experience than it does with the essence of the experience itself.

In our previous explorations, we’ve found that, for the humanist, the primary source of meaning is the human community. And for the naturalist it is the natural world as a whole. For the mystic, the central core of faith lies in direct religious experience. Particular religious forms and practice are secondary. In the words of French philosopher Henri Bergson, “Religion is to mysticism what popularization is to science.” While reading *Scientific American* may give you a certain level of scientific understanding, and may encourage you to pursue science, it does not make you a scientist. Likewise, going to church, or holding a particular set of beliefs may help to understand and encourage a spiritual life, but it is no substitute for direct religious experience.

Writer Elie Wiesel poses the question, “What does mysticism really mean?” And his response is, “It means the way to attain knowledge. It’s close to philosophy, except in philosophy you go horizontally while in mysticism you go vertically.” My only quibble with that statement is that I would say mysticism is “a” way to attain knowledge, not necessarily “the” way. But what does the rest of

the statement mean? The horizontal nature of philosophy means that it works with given raw material, and tries to put it together in a coherent framework of meaning. The vertical nature of mysticism implies obtaining new raw material to work with.

That description hints at what I see as an important part of using mystical experience in a healthy, productive way. That is, it must be filtered through our powers of reason in such a way as to help us make sense of the world – to enhance our structures of meaning. You could compare it to dream work. In fact, dreams could be considered a form of mystical experience. But if you want to interpret your dreams in a useful way, you don't generally consider them as literal descriptions of reality, or as literal predictions of the future. Rather, you use them as additional raw material to work with in formulating a structure of meaning for your life. Or as pointers to issues or questions that need further exploration. And with dreams, as well as other forms of mystical experience, it's really not important where they come from. What's important is what use you make of them.

I'd like to pause here for a bit, and take a look back at some of the historical understandings of mystical experience. One of the most well known treatments of such experiences from the western point of view can be found in William James's classic book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, published in 1902. For James, there are four defining marks of mystical experience. They are 1) Ineffability, 2) Noetic Quality, 3) Transiency, and 4) Passivity. Let me share his own words to expand on those qualities:

Ineffability: The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one's self to understand a lover's state of mind. Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly, and are even likely to consider him weak-minded or absurd. The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experiences an equally incompetent treatment.

Noetic quality: Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations,

revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority. . .

Transiency: Mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day. Often, when faded, their quality can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory; but when they recur it is recognized; and from one recurrence to another it is susceptible of continuous development in what is felt as inner richness and importance.

Passivity: Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power. . . Mystical states, strictly so called, are never merely interruptive. Some memory of their content always remains, and a profound sense of their importance. They modify the inner life of the subject between the times of their recurrence. . .

These four characteristics are sufficient to mark out a group of states of consciousness peculiar enough to deserve a special name and to call for careful study. Let it then be called the mystical group.

One feature of mystical experience that I would add is that not everyone has it. Or, at least, not everyone recognizes it as such. In another classic book on mysticism, *Cosmic Consciousness*, published in 1901, Richard Bucke takes an evolutionary approach to help explain its non-universality. Bucke asserts that there are three forms of consciousness, which lie in an evolutionary continuum. First is “simple consciousness,” which is the basic awareness of one’s surroundings. This form is shared by most of the animal kingdom. Second is “self consciousness,” a form peculiar to humanity, through which a person is conscious of him or herself as a distinct entity apart from the rest of the universe, and can treat his or her own mental states as objects of consciousness.

The third form is “cosmic consciousness,” which implies “a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe.” In Bucke’s view, cosmic consciousness is a recent evolutionary development, not yet widespread

though the human population. As such, its existence is actually quite rare. He devotes most of his book to recounting its evidence in some fourteen individuals, including such people as Gautama the Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, William Blake, and Walt Whitman. He also discusses another thirty-six people in whom he sees evidence of at least partially realized cosmic consciousness. These include Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, among others.

I won't go into great detail about Bucke's understanding of cosmic consciousness, but will list, briefly, what he considers its typical indicators or qualities. They are:

- A subjective light: a sense of being immersed in a flame or a rose-colored cloud.
- A moral elevation
- An intellectual illumination
- The sense of immortality
- The loss of the fear of death
- The loss of the sense of sin
- Experiencing all this suddenly or instantaneously
- An added charm to the personality
- A transfiguration noticeable to others

The ineffable quality of mystical experience, as described by William James, and the rarity of its manifestation as full-blown Cosmic Consciousness, as described by Richard Bucke, leads to difficulty in talking about it in any meaningful way. It seems that you either share the experience or you don't. And if you don't, then any talk about it may just sound like nonsense. And yet those who have mystical experiences generally find them very compelling.

In the interest of encouraging open-mindedness on the part of those who have a hard time seeing mysticism as anything more than mushy-minded mumbo-jumbo, let me suggest a thought experiment. It may also be useful for those mystics among us who are frustrated at their inability to get through to the uninitiated.

Here's your assignment: How would you describe sight to a person who has been blind from birth? In particular, how would you explain the experience of color to them? Take a couple of minutes to think about that. . . I think that's the kind of challenge faced by those who have had mystical experiences trying to explain to someone who hasn't. Whatever imagery is used is bound to be less than satisfactory, because the experience goes qualitatively beyond any particular imagery. It's a whole different quality of experience for which there is no adequate shared language. But I encourage you not to give up trying to explain or

to understand. And don't be too quick to simply dismiss what you can't understand.

Okay, I would like to mention two particular connections between mysticism and Unitarian Universalism. One is historical, dating back about a hundred and fifty years, and the other is contemporary. During the mid-nineteenth century, Unitarianism made a major shift in the direction of dependence on direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder. It came in the form of Transcendentalism, a religious, philosophical, and literary movement that greatly influenced American culture. The Transcendentalists asserted that religious knowledge came not from the written scriptures, but through direct encounters with the Divine, through the inherent faculty of intuition. They were talking about mystical experiences of illumination and understanding. It's not surprising that some of the leading Transcendentalists made Richard Bucke's Cosmic Consciousness roster: namely, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman.

The contemporary Unitarian Universalist link to mysticism comes through an organization called UU Mystics in Community, formed about five years ago to provide a network for UUs sharing an interest in mysticism. On their website, they state:

We believe that direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder is a wellspring for a life of faith. Life and the universe are replete with mystery beyond thought or expectation. Encountering it raises our spiritual awareness, inspires us to have spiritual practices, and opens us to the forces that create and uphold life.

Their stated objectives are:

- To provide inspiration and community to UUs in the quest for direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.
- To involve UUs in the interfaith dialog on the evolving forms of personal and collective consciousness in the 21st century.
- To encourage the development of individual and group contemplative practices within Unitarian Universalist congregations.
- To develop and disseminate information and resources on mysticism and contemplative practices for use in UU religious education programs for both children and adults.

- To encourage personal witness and service reflecting the wellsprings of connection and compassion which open in us through the mystical life.

Mystical experience tends to be a very individual thing. But note that the response of Unitarian Universalists is to form a group of Mystics in Community. I have often maintained that living and sharing in community can enhance the religious journey, even if that journey is centered in our own direct personal experience. Even if we cannot relive the exact experience of another, we can still learn from it. Sharing a common life together, and sharing our stories with one another, can help us make sense of our experiences in a larger context.

It occurs to me that I may have given the impression so far this morning that mysticism is something that belongs to the chosen few. Those who have had profound visions or who have achieved full-blown cosmic consciousness. In fact, I suspect that many of us have experienced at least an occasional glimmer of transcendence.

If you have lost yourself in a piece of music and been thus transported to another level of consciousness, you have encountered transcendence. If you, like William Blake, can see the world in a grain of sand or heaven in a wildflower, then you have encountered transcendence. If you have gazed into the eyes of a loved one and felt deeply within that you and they are one, then you have encountered transcendence. If you, like me, have experienced near-death and had a profound sense of peace and calm, and an assurance that everything is OK, then you have encountered transcendence. If you have gazed up at the starry sky and felt at one with the universe, then you have encountered transcendence. If you have such experiences, and they are important to your faith, then you too have a mystical bent.

Whether or not you have experiences that you would consider mystical, if you have ears to hear, eyes to see, and bodies to feel; if you open yourself to what is before you, you may indeed encounter transcendence through nature, through music, through other people, or through encounters with the deepest parts of yourself as you meditate or contemplate. And then, in the words of one of our popular hymns, “we come together here to make sense of what we find.”

So may it be.