A Humanist Looks at Mysticism

By

Rev. John H. Dietrich

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As Presented and Amended by

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

Within recent years there has been a revival of interest in mysticism … Between 30 and 35 years ago I spent three years in a theological school, and scarcely ever heard the word mentioned; and when it was mentioned it was only to refer to a peculiar and weird religious phenomenon of the past, something we had practically outgrown. But for various reasons the last two decades have witnessed a great change in this respect …

… Whatever opinion one may have of it, one is sure to be told that he has misunderstood it. If he does not possess the mystical temperament, his right to speak of it is challenged … and if he is personally acquainted with the mystical experience its ineffable character does not lend itself to intelligible discourse. So whether inside or outside the charmed circle, discussion seems equally ineffective and unsatisfactory. At the beginning I must confess that I remain outside the charmed circle … However I have tried to understand it, and I recognize the benefits of it in certain forms.

… It is found among all races, primitive and modern, and all religions must take it into consideration when seeking for origins, or for the cause and method of revival after a religion has declined. When a barren orthodoxy has usurped the place of a vital faith, mystics have arisen to show that religion is something more than a dry dogma and ceremony. It is a protest of the individual; inner, living experience against the formal systems into which religions invariably degenerate. Again, when a cold, hard intellectualism has driven out the more poetic and imaginative qualities, mystics have come upon the scene to prove that life is more than an exercise of … reason.

One reason why the subject is so difficult to treat is the great difficulty in diversity of definition. It means very different things as used at different times and by different people … there is religious mysticism and philosophical mysticism and artistic mysticism and ethical mysticism … emphasis may be laid on … mysticism as a method of attaining knowledge and finding the truth, or on … mysticism as an illuminating experience; it may be spontaneous or it may be induced by drugs or by disciplinary exercises …

Some consider it the most valuable experience attainable, involving the highest mental product, while others call it pathological or a symptom of the densest ignorance. Some think of the revelations received through mysticism as the exact words of the Almighty, while others affirm that it is nothing but the insane promptings of a diseased brain …

[T]he modern interest in mysticism has caused its exploitation and commercialization, with the result that we have all kinds of books, which in a false and superficial way seek to

appease the hunger for this experience … [M]ysticism is sometimes identified with mere confusion of thought, and when one becomes enthusiastic over some muddle-headed idea in relation to the infinite, we call it mysticism, but this has nothing to do with real mysticism. Another kind … is occultism, involving certain esoteric practices and weird experiences.

People sometimes speak of unusual states of consciousness as mysticism ... but these are mere mental aberrations and not mysticism … [P]eople sometimes identify mysticism with hallucinations, such as the voices heard by Joan of Arc, the visions which appeared to Swedenborg, and even ghosts seen in the graveyard. This is a very common form of mental pathology … it is not commonly called mysticism when found in an insane asylum; but if the subject is an individual of great prestige … like Mohammet or Joseph Smith, the hallucination is considered mystical. Another kind of so-called mysticism … is the acceptance of some beliefs as true because one feels it must be so without adequate support of evidence or reason ... We usually call these "hunches", but some people call them mystical experiences. Still another mistaken form is the loss of volitional control. The person feels compelled to say or do things over which he has no control, and therefore thinks it must be God in him who talks and acts. These are common occurrences, but they are pathological and not mystical.

What then is mysticism?

… If you examine the writings of the great mystics, to speak only of our western world, from Plato and Plotinus, down through Saint Augustine and Dante, and George Fox and William Blake, to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, you will realize that ... [t]hese people all believe … that they had a different contact with reality ... They had certain periods of ecstasy or illumination when they felt not only in harmony with the universe or God, but actually identified with and a part of him, and through this identification we're able to absorb knowledge. So let us remember that real mysticism means the consciousness or identification with God or reality, and through this identification access to truths above and beyond sense experience. In other words, it means, first, a kind of knowledge not generally recognized except by mystics ... and he cannot communicate it to others; for, since it is above sense perception and intellectual inference, they cannot be described in language …

No one, of course, doubts the reality of these experiences, but we can question the cause ascribed to them; that is, the experiences may be real, but they may have nothing to do with God or reality ... If I say that my feeling of cold is due to poor blood circulation, that cause may be right or wrong … And that which is rejected by the psychologists is not the experience itself, but the cause assigned to it … they have concluded that it is actually an intense emotional state induced in a purely natural way. They do not doubt the facts of the experience, any more than they doubt the existence of dreams, which are somewhat similar

in nature; but they claim there is no reason to account for them on other than common psychological grounds.

… [P]ractically all psychologists agree that the mystical experience is closely associated with the sex factor … It is not without significance, says Professor Knight Dunlap, [author of *Mysticism, Freudianism, and Scientific Pathology* (1920)], that the description of ecstasy in many instances would pass equally well as a description of a sex experience … But even though the experience has a natural foundation, it does not mean that any knowledge gained at the time is useless. The state of relaxation, induced by the experience, is favorable to the production of valuable ideas ... So even though we reject the belief of the mystics that they have been in direct communication with God, we must at least accept the possibility of knowledge gained in this way.

A somewhat less intense form of mystical ecstasy is to be found among the poets, all of whom are more or less mystical. In fact, the very essence of poetry is to be found in attitudes which fall within the category of mysticism, and every great poem at least suggest in varying degree the mystical experience …

The characteristics common to all these instances of ecstasy … are: first, a sudden and unexpected break in the train of thoughts and feelings, without any conscious cause for it; second, a more or less complete loss of the consciousness of the existence of the external world and of the body, coinciding with a feeling of the expansion and freedom of the self; then a sense of lofty illumination which it is impossible to express in words; and finally an incomparable and blessed joy …

Now while the mystic thinks his gift is a supernatural one, it is generally agreed that it is only a romantic and on occasion a pathological exaggeration of man's natural interest in the abstractions of thought ... And while … it is not possible for the mind to transcend itself, it is possible that the mystics can offer us from their experience some hints that are valuable ... No one ever realizes every possibility of his nature, and in view of this fact it might be well to ask if we cannot extract from this mystical method greater satisfactions than we usually attain.

In this effort we can dismiss the more exaggerated forms, which are really pathological, and think of those mystics, who have not tried to soar beyond the bounds of their natural being, but who, within the limits of the human mind, have sought an intensity of experience that would give them a deeper sense of life and reality in times when religion was decadent as a result of corrupt institutionalism and cold intellectualism. For them, religion was an inner experience, a personal inspiration, and aliveness to the real issues of life … The greatest weakness of our modern liberal movement is that it lacks this inner conviction. It is essentially an intellectual movement, which argues and debates and gives us a kind of

intellectual satisfaction without any real motivating power. It does not penetrate the inner part of our nature from which conduct springs.

... In other words, our religion would be a more vital thing for us and a more powerful thing for the world, if we could adopt the mystics' attitude toward it … What I am trying to say is that our liberal movement is over intellectualized … There is no doubt that liberalism in adopting the scientific method has come into possession of an increasing body of sound knowledge, that it has been successful in diagnosing our more serious ills, that it has a well-defined vision of the goal toward which man[kind] should travel, that it is fully aware of the necessity of mankind itself transforming the life of society, but somehow it lacks the emotional drive to generate the concrete enthusiasms which are essential to the making of these things effective in our individual and social lives … And I believe this can be done only by achieving something of that passionate desire of the mystic to identify himself with the objects of his religion, to lose himself in the contemplation of these objects until they become a vital part of his psychic structure, affecting his emotional and volitional nature. When we strip mysticism of all its extravagances, its real meaning is the inward possession of great ideals and the transformation of character and purpose by the influence of those ideals, and in this sense we should all be mystics, for it is only by this method that religion and morals have any transforming power.

There is another type of mysticism, which does not in any sense include the supernatural or even the idea of God, but which involves practically all the better elements of the mystical experience, and which has consoled and reinforced the lives of many people. I refer to what is sometimes called nature mysticism—the feeling of identification with nature … the consciousness that we are definite parts of the natural world ... In this urban age, when people are concentrated in great cities and cut off from direct contact with nature and dominated almost entirely by their own petty mechanical inventions, there is little opportunity for this rich experience ...

This experience is best expressed by the poets, especially by Walt Whitman, who says, "There comes a time when one feels through [one's] whole being, and pronouncedly the emotional part, that identity between [one]self subjectively and nature objectively".

… surely there is no richer experience than when, as Emerson suggests, we leave our life of solemn trifles and enter the gates of the forest or "go forth under the open sky, and list to nature's teachings". Here indeed is solace for the frayed nerves, balm for the tired mind, comfort and uplift for the distracted soul. We become companions with the flowers and the birds, and feel a stream of new life flowing into our veins. We become conscious of the life that flows through nature, and makes it, like ourselves, a living thing. We realized that as far back as our imagination can reach, this life force has been moving and changing and

evolving into the myriad forms which make up the wonder of the world, and it is this same life force that energizes and inspires and lifts us. We are part of the creative process

… If we can more frequently attain the imaginative contact with nature by which we could more fully realize our identification with it as a vital part of cosmic reality, our lives would not only be greatly enriched, but immensely reinforced and fortified … In this connection, I think of the old mythological story of Antaeus, who was a child of the earth, and no matter how exhausted he became, whenever he touched the earth again all his former strength came back. And in his contest with Hercules, the only way by which the old hero could master him was by lifting him in the air, preventing all contact with the earth, and then crushing him with his mighty strength. We are all Antaeuses. We renew our strength in the arms of our Mother Earth. And thousands of us go through life impoverished and innervated and probably die sooner than we need because the Hercules-like power of the artificial world grasp us in its arms, keeps us away from nature, and crushes out our life.

Before closing the subject, I must speak about what is frequently called a mystical attitude toward life in the world, with which again I have a great deal of sympathy … It usually means no more than the use of the imagination and emotion in our interpretation of the world and of human life. In other words, it is the opposite of drab realism and matter-of-factness. It is a consciousness of the mystery and wonder of existence. It is that form which music and art, poetry and imaginative literature spring …

This merely means living imaginatively and emotionally as well as intellectually and rationally; and it is a vital part of a well-rounded personality. By imaginative feeling we reach out to the world and seek to become conscious of our oneness with the whole of nature and of life, or at least we seek to interpret it in terms of beauty and unity. I believe that much will be gained through the cultivation of this so-called mystical attitude ... Science represents the external approach to reality, and mysticism represents the internal approach, which may also be important ... In fact, there are things in the world which cannot be understood only through the senses or by means of logical thought ... Poets and artists are frequently dominated by their imagination and feelings, but businessmen and scientists whose lives are absorbed in facts and figures, need to cultivate their feelings in an intelligent way. The ideal, of course, is a sane and well-balanced personality, capable of imagination and emotion as well as clear thinking.

I think that our humanism should try to retain some of the qualities of the mystic, especially in this sense of imbuing it with imagination and poetry. There is a grave danger that we resolve life into a series of logical propositions, based on factual observation. We are too prone to ignore the inner life of man[kind] in order to create a new social order … Humanism should be aware of the presence of this [mystic] urge and seek to cultivate it; and thus recognize, as do other religions, that there is in the universe, including human life,

something mysterious, something greater than the individual … We are not only individuals, we are corporate parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, and will continue into the future ... In short, we should recognize ourselves as component parts of the great body of humanity, in which we live and move and have our beings; we should seek to attain that mystical experience of identification with the human race, to the adventure of which our individual lives are but fragmentary contributions.

More than anything else the world needs this spirit today. No legislation, no new economic system, no changed industrial order, in and of themselves, will create this needed unity. The transfer of power from a self-seeking few to a self-seeking many will not help much, unless this new spirit infuses and inspires [us] with a new consciousness of the mystic unity that underlies all our social life. If as individuals we are wrapped up in our own concerns, our private plans and personal ambitions, so content to be merely our private separate exclusive selves, so blind to our essential unity with all other members of society, so oblivious to our vital place and function in the living body of society, we miss the greatest of all experiences—that of achieving the consciousness of our true oneness with the common life about us. To this extent, I am sure that much will be gained through the combination of humanism and mysticism.

So while humanism may not admit the claims of the mystics, it may at least recognize the methods of the mystics as the way to discover some of the favorable conditions of the abundant life. In the struggle for more and better life, [one] needs, among other things, moments of quiet to free [ourselves] from the distractions and confusions of modern life and to reap the fruits of past experience in deep contemplation. And while in these moments [we] may not experience the ineffable and unutterable illumination of the mystical trance, [we] may achieve a sense of harmony with the whole of life, which inspires the [ordinary] person to an ethical and practical religious attitude, which brings peace and trust and humility to the individual, and reflects itself in a more wholesome and generous attitude toward [our] fellow men [and women].