

The Mystical Core of Organized Religion

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Mysticism has been democratized in our day. Not so long ago, “real” mystics were those who had visions, levitations, and bilocations and, most important, were those who had lived in the past; any contemporary mystic was surely a fake (if not a witch). Today, we realize that extraordinary mystical phenomena have little to do with the essence of mysticism. (Of course, genuine mystics had told us this all along; we just wouldn’t listen.) We’ve come to understand mysticism as the experience of communion with Ultimate Reality (i.e., with “God,” if you feel comfortable with this time-honored, but also time-distorted term).

Many of us experience a sense of communion with Ultimate Reality once in a while. In our best, most alive moments, we feel somehow one with that fundamental whatever-it-is that keeps us all going. Even psychological research suggests that the experience of communion with Ultimate Reality is nearly universal among humans. So we find ourselves officially recognized as bona fide mystics. Some of us even sense the challenge to translate the bliss of universal communion into the nitty-gritty of human community in daily living. That’s certainly a step forward.

Like every step forward in life, however, the discovery of mysticism as everyone’s inalienable right brings with it a puzzling tension. Those who feel this tension most keenly are people who have long been members of an established religion, with its doctrines, ethical precepts, and rites. They may discover the mystical reality inside the religious establishment or outside of it: either in church or on a mountaintop, while listening to Bach’s B-Minor Mass, or while watching a sunset. In any case, but especially out in nature, those who taste mystical ecstasy may begin to sense a discrepancy between this undeniably religious experience and the forms that normally pass as religious. If the religious pursuit is essentially the human quest for meaning, then these most meaningful moments of human existence must certainly be called “religious.” They are, in fact, quickly recognized as the very heart of religion, especially by people who have the good fortune of feeling at home in a religious tradition. And yet, the body of religion doesn’t always accept its heart. This can happen in any religious tradition, Eastern or Western. To the establishment, after all, mysticism is suspect. The established religion asks: Why is there a need for absorption in the Cloud of Unknowing when we have spelled out everything so clearly? And isn’t that emphasis on personal experience a bit egocentric? Who can be sure that people standing on their own feet won’t go their own way? These suspicions gave rise to the famous saying that “myst-i-cism begins with mist, puts the I in the center, and ends in schism.”

In every religion, there is this tension between the mystic and the religious establishment. As great a mystic as Rumi (1207–73) attacked his own Muslim establishment:

*When the school and the mosque and the minaret
get torn down, then the dervishes
can begin their community.*^[1]

Al Hallaj (c. 858–922), on the other hand, was attacked by that same establishment, tortured, and crucified for his mystical lifestyle and convictions, a persecution not without political overtones. One way or the other, the same plot is acted out repeatedly on the stage of history: every religion seems to begin with mysticism and end up in politics. If we could understand the inner workings of this process, maybe we could deal with the tension between mystical religion and religious establishment in a new way. Maybe we could transform the polarization into a mutually vitalizing polarity. Understanding would certainly make us more compassionate with those caught up on both sides of the struggle.

The question we need to tackle is this: How does one get from mystic experience to an established religion? My one-word answer is: inevitably. What makes the process inevitable is that we do with our mystical experience what we do with every experience, that is, we try to understand it; we opt for or against it; we express our feelings with regard to it. Do this with your mystical experience and you have all the makings of a religion. This can be shown.

Moment by moment, as we experience this and that, our intellect keeps step; it interprets what we perceive. This is especially true when we have one of those deeply meaningful moments: our intellect swoops down upon that mystical experience and starts interpreting it. Religious doctrine begins at this point. There is no religion in the world that doesn't have its doctrine. And there is no religious doctrine that could not ultimately be traced back to its roots in mystical experience – that is, if one had time and patience enough, for those roots can be mighty long and entangled. Even if you said, "My private religion has no doctrine for I know that my deepest religious awareness cannot be put into words," that would be exactly what we are talking about: an intellectual interpretation of your experience. Your "doctrine" would be a piece of so-called negative (apophatic) theology, found in most religions.

Some of us are more intellectually inclined than others, more likely to interpret experience by thinking it through, but all of us do so to a certain extent. Yet, forming an opinion is not all we do. On the basis of that opinion, we take sides for or against; we desire or reject. Our will does that. As soon as we recognize something as good for us, we cannot help desiring it. That is why we commit ourselves willingly to go after it. The moment we taste the mystical bliss of universal belonging, we say a willing yes to it. In this unconditional yes lies the root of ethics. And all ethical systems can ultimately be reduced to acting as one acts when one feels a sense of belonging.

It is always the whole human person that interacts with the world, but when the interaction aims at knowing, we speak of the intellect. When desire stands in the foreground, we speak of the will. The intellect sifts out what is true; the will reaches out for what is good. But

there is a third dimension to reality: beauty. Our whole being resonates with what is beautiful, like a crystal lampshade that reverberates every time you hit a C sharp on the piano. Where this feeling of resonance (or, in other situations, dissonance) marks our interaction with the world, we speak of the emotions. How joyfully the emotions reverberate with the beauty of our mystical experience! The more they respond, the more we will celebrate that experience. We may remember the day and the hour and celebrate it year after year. We may go back to the garden bench where the singing of that thrush swept us off our feet. We may never hear the bird again, but a ritual has been established, a kind of pilgrimage has been undertaken to a personal holy place. Ritual, too, is an element of every religion. And every ritual in the world celebrates in one form or another belonging – pointing toward that ultimate belonging we experience in moments of mystical awareness.

The response we give in those moments is always wholehearted. In the heart, at the core of the human person, intellect, will, and emotions still form an integral whole. Yet, once the response of the heart expresses itself in thinking, willing, or feeling, the original wholeness of the response is refracted, or broken. That is why we are never fully satisfied with the expression of those deepest insights, in word or image. Nor is our willing commitment to justice and peace, our yes to belonging, as wholehearted on the practical level as it is in moments of mystical communion. And our feelings often fail to celebrate the beauty that we glimpsed unveiled for a moment, the beauty that continues to shine through the veil of daily reality. Thus, doctrine, ethics, and ritual bear the mark of our shortcomings, even in these earliest buds of religion. Yet, they fulfill a most important function: they keep us connected, no matter how imperfectly, with the truth, goodness, and beauty that once overwhelmed us. That is the glory of every religion.

As long as all goes well with a religion, then doctrine, ethics, and ritual work like an irrigation system, bringing ever fresh water from the source of mysticism into daily life. Religions differ from each other, as irrigation systems do. There are objective differences: some systems are simply more efficient. But subjective preferences are also important. You tend to like the system you are used to; your familiarity with it makes it more effective for you, no matter what other models may be on the market. Time has an influence on the system: the pipes tend to get rusty and start to leak, or they get clogged up. The flow from the source slows down to a trickle.

Fortunately, I have not yet come across a religion where the system didn't work at all. Unfortunately, however, deterioration begins on the day the system is installed. At first, doctrine is simply the interpretation of mystical reality; it flows from it and leads back to it. But then the intellect begins to interpret that interpretation. Commentaries on commentaries are piled on top of the original doctrine. With every new interpretation of the previous one, we move farther away from the experiential source. Live doctrine fossilizes into dogmatism.

A similar process inevitably takes place with ethics. At first, moral precepts simply spell out how to translate mystical communion into practical living. The precepts remind us to act as one acts among people who belong together, and so they keep pointing back to our deepest, mystical sense of belonging. (The fact that a community will often draw too narrow a circle around itself is a different matter. That's simply an inadequate translation of the original intuition. The circle of mystical communion is all-inclusive.) Because we want to express unchanging commitment to the goodness we glimpsed in mystical moments, we engrave the moral precepts on stone tablets. But in doing so, we make the expression of that commitment unchangeable. When circumstances change and call for a different expression of the same commitment, the dos and don'ts remain stone-engraved and unchangeable. Morality has turned into moralism.

What happens with ritual? At first, as we have seen, it is a true celebration. We celebrate by remembering gratefully (everything else is optional). The particular event that we celebrate merely triggers that grateful remembrance, a remembrance of those moments in which we are most deeply aware of limitless belongings. As a reminder and renewal of our ultimate connectedness, every celebration has religious overtones, echoes of mystical communion. It is also the reason why, when we celebrate, we want all those who belong to us in a special way to be present. Repetition also is a part of celebration. Every time we celebrate a birthday, for example, that day is enriched by memory upon memory of all previous ones. But repetition has its danger, especially for the celebration of religious rituals. Because they are so important, we want to give them the perfect form. And before we know it, we are more concerned with form than with content. When form becomes formalized and content is forgotten, ritual turns into ritualism.

We may try to depict this process (and its happy ending, when all goes well) in a simple diagram (see Figure 1). The arrows represent the flow of mystical light, as it were. The white light of original wholeness is refracted through the lens of the mind's action (the Founder's own mind, to begin with). As intellect, will, and emotions inevitably process the mystical experience, the basic elements of religion (doctrine, ethics, ritual) originate. Religion in its diverse expressions is now filtered through historical influence (e.g., institutionalization) and tends to deteriorate. It can, however, be purified and renewed whenever a faithful heart recognizes, in spite of all distortions, the original light. Thus, the believer's mysticism becomes one with the Founder's. The heart of religion finds itself in the religion of the heart. The two are one.

[Figure 1]

Sad as it is, religion left to itself turns irreligious. Once, in Hawaii, after I had been walking on still-hot volcanic rock, another image for this process occurred to me; the image not of water but of fire. The beginnings of the great religions were like the eruptions of a volcano. There was fire, there was heat, there was light: the light of mystical insight freshly spelled out in a new teaching; the best of hearts aglow with commitment to a sharing community;

and celebration, as fiery as new wine. The light of doctrine, the glow of ethical commitment, and the fire of ritual celebration were expressions that gushed forth red hot from the depths of mystical consciousness. But, as that stream of lava flowed down the sides of the mountain, it began to cool off. The farther it got from its origins, the less it looked like fire; it turned into rock. Dogmatism, moralism, ritualism: all are layers of ash deposits and volcanic rock that separate us from the fiery magma deep down below.

But there are fissures and clefts in the igneous rock of the old lava flows; there are hot springs, fumaroles, and geysers; there are even occasional earthquakes and minor eruptions. These represent the great men and women who reformed and renewed religious tradition from within. In one way or another, this is our task, too. Every religion has a mystical core. The challenge is to find access to it and to live in its power. In this sense, every generation of believers is challenged anew to make its religion truly religious.

This is the point where mysticism clashes with the institution. We need religious institutions. If they weren't there, we would create them. Life creates structures. Think of the ingenious constructions life invents to protect its seeds, of all those husks and hulls and pods, the shucks and burrs and capsules found in an autumn hedgerow. Come spring, the new life within cracks these containers (even walnut shells!) and bursts forth. Crust, rind, and chaff split open and are discarded. Our social structures, however, have a tendency to perpetuate themselves. Religious institutions are less likely than seed pods to yield to the new life stirring within. And although life (over and over again) creates structures, structures do not create life.

Those who are closest to the life that created the structures will have the greatest respect for them; they will also be the first ones, however, to demand that structures that no longer support but encumber life must be changed. Those closest to the mystical core of religion will often be uncomfortable agitators within the system. How genuine they are will show itself by their compassionate understanding for those whom they must oppose; after all, mystics come from a realm where "we" and "they" are one.

In some cases, officials of institutional religion are themselves mystics, as was true of Pope John XXIII. These are the men and women who sense when the time has come for the structures to yield to life. They can distinguish between faithfulness to life and faithfulness to the structures that life has created in the past, and they get their priorities right. Rumi did so when he wrote:

*Not until faithfulness turns into betrayal
and betrayal into faith
can any human being become part of the truth.*^[2]

Note that betrayal – or what is seen as such – is not the last step; there is a further one, in which betrayal turns into faith. This going out and returning is the journey of the hero; it is

our task. Faith (i.e., courageous trust) lets go of institutional structures and so finds them on a higher level – again and again. This process is as painful as life, and equally surprising.

One of the great surprises is that the fire of mysticism can melt even the rigor mortis of dogmatism, legalism, and ritualism. By the glance or the touch of those whose hearts are burning, doctrine, ethics, and ritual come aglow with the truth, goodness, and beauty of the original fire. The dead letter comes alive, breathing freedom. “God’s writing engraved on the tablets” is what the uninitiated read in Exodus 32:16. But only the consonants are written in the Hebrew text: (chrth). Mystics who happen to be rabbis look at this word and say: Don’t read charath (engraved); read cheruth (freedom)! God’s writing is not “engraved”; it is freedom!

Saying more than she realized, a schoolgirl wrote, “Many dead animals of the past changed into fossils while others preferred to be oil.” That’s what mystics prefer. Alive or dead, they keep religion afire.

Notes

1. From an unpublished translation, with the kind permission of Coleman Barks and John Moyne, whose volume of Rumi translations is entitled *This Longing* (Putney, Vt.: Threshold, 1988).
2. Ibid.

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