

CENTRE FOR RADICAL CHRISTIANITY
and Living Spirituality Network joint conference
MYSTICISM AND CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY
6th November 2010 Session I
Summary

Baron Friedrich von Hugel (1852-1925) argued there are three dimensions to the authentic religious life – the institutional, the intellectual, and the experiential – we need a balance of all three for religious and spiritual health. American philosopher Ken Wilbur suggests there are three essential ‘forms of knowing’ – scientific knowledge which is arrived at by experiment, rational knowledge which is arrived at by the intellect, and contemplative knowledge, which is experiential.

A hunger for this experiential dimension lies at the very heart of the so-called ‘spirituality revolution’ and drives the popular interest in the mystics of all the major faith traditions.

Mysticism and spirituality are closely related but not interchangeable. They both emphasise direct, personal experience. They are both key features of the contemporary religious landscape.

The history of mysticism is rent with disagreement – different disagreements in different ages – but there is an enduring tension between strict and exclusive definitions of mysticism and broad and democratic definitions. In the first view, mystics are extremely rare and specially gifted individuals who see visions, hear voices and experience strange states of consciousness – in the second, mystical experience is a transforming gift, available to anyone attentive enough to receive it.

Introducing his lecture on *Mysticism and the Christian Path* Marcus Borg said he’d chosen his theme for two reasons: first the importance of mysticism for the future of Christianity and secondly because of its importance to him personally. He quoted the renowned Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner who said that *the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all*, and he spoke about how his own mystical experiences in his early 30s had *made God real to him*.

Borg took as his starting point the medieval description *cognitio experimentalis Dei*, the experiential knowledge of God. Mysticism is about experiencing God, or the Sacred, or Spirit as real. (See Borg handout)

William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, based on the Gifford Lectures he delivered in Edinburgh was published at the turn of the last century. James’ description of the features of mystical experience stands the test of time.

Mysticism takes seriously the post-modern *turn to experience* as the key source of authority in our lives. The post-modern *turn to experience* which also lies at the heart of the so-called, and much-trumpeted, ‘Spirituality Revolution’.

There are dangers and pitfalls in spirituality ... but note also the sheer energy, discipline and creativity with which people are engaging more deeply with the meaning and significance of spirituality in contemporary life and culture ... a pioneering, radical and deeply committed spiritual journey: a journey undertaken by those Gordon Lynch calls *spiritual progressives*

Huston Smith: *Mystics are people who have a talent for sensing places where life's carapace is cracked, and through its chinks they catch glimpses of a world beyond. And for Joan Chittister, The prophet is simply the mystic in action.*

Dorothee Soelle emphasises the subversive and political dimension of mysticism. Gordon Lynch highlights the social, political and environmental activism of the spiritual progressive.

David Tacey: *These [mystical] experiences are part of an evolving sacred tradition and not simply random New Age encounters with the cosmos. ... Formal religion, could he suggests, be enriched and renewed by [such] ... mystical experiences.*

Beverly Lanzetta: *There is a new spiritual movement afoot, initiated not by religions or Masters, but by the action of the Divine in the souls of people around the globe. It is a direct touching of the inner spark of the soul by the divine mystery that is calling people ... to a deeper experience of the sacred.*

Beware of what Dorothee Soelle describes as *a greedy hankering after experience* for its own sake. This is *not* true mysticism. Mark McIntosh: *Contemplation is not particularly concerned with the inner states of the contemplative ... but with the breaking through of wisdom into the contemplative's consciousness.*

To sum up: contemporary spirituality is inherently mystical, based on a broad and inclusive understanding of that term. It reflects a deep hunger for direct encounter with God or the Sacred, (The Real or The More), and is part of an evolving sacred tradition with a long, complex but coherent and traceable history. It is not, or should not be, about a *greedy hankering after experience for its own sake* but about being as open and as attentive as possible to the inflowing of Wisdom.

Today's mystical longings, insights and experiences are being gifted to us now precisely in response to our current needs, just as Grace Janzten argued they have been, in different ways and different circumstances throughout history.

We live with a sense of *being in crisis* and of having *reached the end of known solutions* to the overwhelming problems of today's world. Many of us feel ourselves to be in a state of impasse.

Constance Fitzgerald: *Our experience of God and our spirituality must emerge from our concrete, historical situation and must return to that situation to feed it and enliven it ... What if, by chance, our time in evolution is a dark-night time – a time of crisis and transition that must be understood if it is to be part of learning a new vision and harmony for the species and the planet.*