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Mysticism And Spirituality In The 21th Century

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Abstract: *Mysticism and spirituality have undergone significant transformations in the 21st century, shaped by the dynamic interplay of cultural, technological, and social forces. This abstract delves into the evolving landscape of mysticism and spirituality, highlighting key themes and trends that characterize their expression in contemporary society. One prominent aspect of 21st-century mysticism and spirituality is their integration with technology. Online platforms, meditation apps, and virtual reality experiences have provided new avenues for seekers to connect, share experiences, and explore spiritual practices. Moreover, the digital age has facilitated the globalization of spiritual ideas, fostering cross-cultural exchange and dialogue. Furthermore, the 21st century has witnessed a growing emphasis on mindfulness, well-being, and holistic living. Practices such as meditation, yoga, and mindfulness-based interventions have gained mainstream acceptance, with many turning to these tools for stress reduction, mental health support, and personal growth. Moreover, there is a burgeoning interest in the intersection of science and spirituality, as researchers explore phenomena such as consciousness and quantum physics from a spiritual perspective.*

Key Words: Mysticism, spirituality, transformations, dynamic, technological, social forces, evolving landscape.

This paper aims to provide a precise definition of mysticism by examining the historical mystics from ancient times to the present day. During the debate, my aim is to dispel any misconceptions about the term "mysticism," which has, in some instances, triggered mistrust and terror. I want to ensure that such negative associations are no longer present. I will examine the significance of spiritual guidance for those who encounter mystical phenomena in their Christian journey. I will include insights gained from my own exploration of mysticism. Additionally, there will be an analysis and summary of an interview conducted with four individuals on their experiences and journey in the Christian faith.

A contemporary mystical description taken from Paul Hawker's *Secret Affairs of the Soul*, "I cannot say how long it took to develop, but the ecstasy lasted over roughly three weeks. The main sensation was of being loved, a flood of sweetness of great strength, without any element of sentimentality or anything but itself. The description is quite inadequate. I also felt a unification of myself with the external world: I did not lose my own identity, yet all things and I somehow entered into each other; all things seemed to "speak" to me. Something was communicated to me, not in words or images, but in another form of knowing." (man aged 47)

My own experience- Throughout many years, I have been captivated by the ancient mystics, who had a profound closeness to the divine, expressed their loving connection with God in charming manners, and encountered mystical experiences of God. However, I have often pondered if I could ever attain the same level of closeness to God that they seemed to possess. Therefore, I am eager to investigate mysticism and its relevance to contemporary Christians. Do contemporary mystics exist? Mysticism refers to a spiritual or religious belief system that involves seeking a direct experience or union with the divine or ultimate reality. It often involves practices such as meditation, contemplation, and introspection to get a deeper understanding of the mystical. Does mysticism equate to spiritual experience? Does mysticism exhibit elitist tendencies? Does the attainment of mysticism depend on the extent to which one is prepared to make sacrifices and endure hardships in their pursuit of following Christ? What would be the lifestyle of a mystic in contemporary society? Do other faiths also encounter the enigma of the divine? What distinguishes it from Christian mysticism? I am intrigued by several inquiries that have led me to explore this subject, and I embark on this effort with a fervent desire to acquire more knowledge!

Definition- I'll start by discussing the phrases "spiritual experience" and mysticism. The two words are interchangeable, in my opinion. Although I have used the word mysticism throughout this article, in contemporary use it may just as readily mean spiritual experience.

Mysticism has often been viewed skeptically by many Christian denominations because of its perceived association with Eastern faiths and New Age ideologies. Many individuals in the western world have actively sought out mysticism and meditation experts from Asia. These individuals possess a strong yearning for a deep connection with God and a profound aspiration to awaken their spiritual core. Johnston W. writes, "The mystical path in all religions is similar, and we Christians



can learn from others, yet each mystical tradition has its own distinctive features. The Christian mystical path is above all a following of Christ in love." So, mysticism in Christianity is centered on Christ.

The apprehension around mysticism stems from the willingness to allow the other to show themselves as they choose during contemplative meditation. The act of prayer involves relinquishing preconceived notions and embracing a receptive attitude towards the other's preferred mode of communication. It necessitates placing faith in God and being prepared to relinquish our own desires in favor of God's intentions. Not consistently a straightforward location to exist. To elucidate the concept of mysticism, I have presented a biblical perspective as well as several historical viewpoints espoused by numerous mystics over the ages.

Biblical Understanding- The term "mystery" in the New Testament is derived from the Greek word "mysterion" and is associated with the verb "myein," which refers to the action of shutting, such as closing one's eyes or lips. It expresses a perception of something that is concealed or confidential. To have a better understanding of this phrase, it is most effective to examine its origins in the Old Testament. The Israelites believed that God resided in the celestial realm, and beside him were a group of counselors known as "the council of the holy ones" (Psalms 89:7) or "all the host of heaven" (1 Kings 22:19). The choices they made were concealed from humanity, with the exception of the prophets. In the New Testament, Jesus informs his followers, "I have revealed to you the enigmatic nature of the kingdom of God" (Mark 4:11). The enigma revolves around the divine scheme of redemption in the person of Jesus Christ. In his epistle to the Corinthians, Paul declares that he and his companions are "servants of Christ and custodians of the enigmatic truths of God" (1 Cor 4:1). Paul often uses the term "mysterion" in his writings to describe the "mystery of Christ" (Eph 3:4), which signifies that both Gentiles and Jews may attain salvation. In Colossians 1:26-27, the author refers to a profound intimacy by stating that "the mystery hidden from ages and from generations past" is none other than "Christ in you, the hope for glory." Mystics often discuss the concept of the indwelling Christ exerting control over their lives, similar to how it was evident in Paul's life as articulated in Galatians 2:20. "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

Early Christian Mystics- The early Christian interpretation of "the mystical" was seeking the concealed manifestation of Christ inside the scriptures, which subsequently led to an encounter of unity with Christ.

Origen (185-253) wrote that "to understand how all scripture centred on Christ did not just involve reading and interpreting the bible but to sense the inner meaning which was only revealed by grace (1 Cor. 2:16). It was not about some extraordinary mystical phenomenon but more about an understanding of scripture that pointed to words about the mystery of Christ. The presence of Christ was real and hidden in the scriptures and could only be seen with the eyes of faith. Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) had a 'doctrine of God's incomprehensibility' in which he gave a narrative exegesis of scripture and then going back over it again to give the spiritual, hidden understanding. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) adds to the above with his interest in ecstasy and visions where a person is taken beyond the normal bounds of sense perception."

Medieval Mystics- Throughout the Middle Ages, several Christian mystics emerged, including notable figures such as St. Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, St. Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, and other lesser-known individuals.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) talked of the fact that "Christ was hidden in a literal sense, that although he had no experience in his senses he knew at an affective interior level that Christ's presence was revealed to him. Only by the warmth of my heart did I know that he was there...."

Dominican Spirituality included several mystics such as Thomas Aquinas, Eckhart, Tauler, and Suso. Henry Suso (1295-1366) described "mysticism as the state in which the soul loses its feeling of separate existence from God and achieves a state of unity without any difference. The ultimate state of one with God, which beyond all understanding, is achieved via a process of self-abnegation that leads to a direct and intuitive knowledge".

Mystics of the Early Modern Period- Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), a Spanish mystic, authored the Spiritual Exercises with the primary objective of facilitating a direct encounter with the divine. He emphasized that the primary objective of the spiritual life is to align our own will with the will of God. He attained a significant level of surrender to God and his life demonstrated a profound awareness of the divine presence within him.

According to Carmelite spirituality, Teresa of Avila (1515-82) and John of the Cross (1542-91) expressed that "the objective of the contemplative life is for the soul to undergo a divine transformation, resulting in a union with God through love. Teresa has authored several books, one of which being *The Interior Castle*. In this book, she eloquently describes the pinnacle of mystical connection as the 'spiritual marriage' between the soul and God". The actual manifestation of her religion in loving her neighbor had more significance to her than her many encounters with trances, visions, and ecstasies. She would meditate on the 'Life of Christ' and as a result, have an overwhelming sense of God's presence inside her, leaving



no room for question that she was completely immersed in Him. St. John's mysticism was characterized by apophaticism, in which he elucidates the process of the soul's disengagement from the self, ultimately resulting in the exclusive knowledge of God. The poem "Dark Night" portrays the process of detachment and purification, leading to the perfect alignment of the soul with the divine intent.

Certain readers of the Interior Castle, particularly those who focused on the 6th house which exhaustively explores exceptional experiences, may have developed the perception that Christian mysticism was exclusive and reserved for a privileged few.

Augustin Poulain supported this view in his work, "The Graces of Interior Prayer, where he wrote that there was an essential difference between mystical and ordinary Christians and the former were especially called to it. Poulain's work came under strong criticism and there was a call to universal holiness that all Christians are to follow".

Mystics of our Time- Tomas Merton (1915-1968), an American monk, emphasized the absence of differentiation between ordinary and mystical Christians, asserting that all individuals are called to pursue the path of Christ. His exposition of esoteric teachings was founded upon the concept of unwaveringly adhering to the divine will over an extended period of time. The process starts with altering one's conduct, followed by a gradual development of deep affection for God. His methodology emphasizes altruism and commitment instead than focusing on specific procedures. He writes, "to reach true awareness of God as well as ourselves, we have to renounce our selfish and limited self and enter into a whole new kind of existence discovering an inner centre of motivation and love which makes us see ourselves and everything else in an entirely new light. Call it faith, call it contemplative illumination, call it the sense of God or even mystical union, all these are different aspects and levels of the same kind of realization, the awakening to a new awareness of ourselves in Christ, created in Him, redeemed by Him, to be transformed and glorified in and with him."

David Steindl-Rast, a writer who is part of a religious community, restated Ruskin's words regarding the experience of being an artist: "A mystic is not a special kind of human being: rather every human being is a special kind of mystic."

Karl Rahner, a Jesuit priest, was a prominent Catholic theologian who had a significant impact. The essence of his teaching was to acknowledge and thereafter embody "God's self-bestowal" - the enigmatic phenomenon known as grace. He saw the universal accessibility of divine benevolence, extending to all individuals, irrespective of their religious affiliation. In order to acknowledge and accept God's self-bestowal, he maintains that it is necessary to engage in prayer. (James 4:8) Through prayer, we acknowledge the shortcomings of our hearts, and in due course, God intervenes and reshapes our hearts, aligning them with His own spirit. Karl Rahner discusses the concept of "everyday mysticism," which refers to the merging of our mundane daily activities with the divine presence of God. In this condition, our exterior actions harmoniously align with our internal disposition via the benevolent influence of God's grace and love. His "version of mysticism is not for the privileged few but a feature of people's everyday experience as they struggle to live the Christian way of life." He sees mysticism not only as an inward encounter, but also as a process of relinquishing oneself and dedicating oneself to serving others.

It is evident that mysticism has transitioned from being exclusive to a few group of devoted Christians to being available to all Christians. Previously, in order to practice mysticism, it was necessary to be a monk or a nun and to distance oneself from worldly matters and other religious beliefs. However, nowadays mysticism is accessible to everyone.

One could dispute the process of spiritual elevation and the apparent development of divine favor. In 1944, Rahner wrote an article on the conventional approaches to understanding Christian perfection and the mystical journey towards spiritual elevation. He said that the use of such terms might inspire Christians to conceptualize the spiritual journey as a progression through several phases. As one advances, they receive more grace and are required to do certain duties in order to attain greater holiness. Individuals who fail to do the assigned responsibilities are farther distant from God and possess a lower level of perfection. He vehemently rejects these views, asserting that grace and mystical ascension should be seen just as our reaction to God's favor, without any further significance. Individuals may experience an increase in maturity as a result of their evolving attitude towards God. Put simply, improving one's prayer quality and encountering God's mercy does not imply entering a different realm of God. He remains constant. The divine bestowal of his own being - grace - remains uniform for all individuals, with no one being granted access to a greater measure of grace. Furthermore, it is incorrect to believe that the daily practice of Christian life serves as a preparation for attaining 'mystical union', since this state exists in a distinct realm. "The traditional mystics may experience God's grace in an extraordinary way but all Christians experience it, perhaps in a more hidden and less developed way." Karl Rahner presents a perspective on mysticism and Christianity that is more comprehensive and inclusive, rather than exclusive or elitist. According to his writing, Christians do not need to isolate



themselves from normal life in order to encounter God. Instead, they may find the 'Holy Mystery' while being immersed in the world. In my perspective, mysticism in the 21st century refers to the spiritual encounter with the concealed benevolence of God that becomes evident in our everyday existence.

Spiritual Direction and Mysticism- Spiritual Direction is crucial when an individual is confronted with the overwhelming presence of the divine and seeks guidance in understanding this profound phenomenon. As a spiritual director, we may aid individuals in analyzing their experiences and guiding them in discerning the revelations that God intends to convey to them. Occasionally, this might be a singular occurrence in an individual's life and concludes at that point. In his book "Secret Affairs of the Soul," Hawker references several instances of similar occurrences. These occurrences, sometimes referred to as "times of ecstasy or mystic awareness" have been reported to have a profound impact on individuals, leading them to recognize a higher force beyond their own existence. Individuals are presented with the option to engage with God and actively seek assistance in comprehending their spiritual encounters, such as seeing a spiritual guide. Alternatively, they may choose to preserve these experiences as a source of solace and reflection during challenging periods.

There are those who actively strive to "pay attention to God as he reveals himself" and intentionally cultivate a connection with Him. These individuals may greatly benefit from spiritual guidance. The director has the ability to assist individuals in discerning their own response to God's message and subsequently guiding them in determining their course of action.

Spiritual guidance may facilitate an individual's recognition of the previously concealed enigma within themselves. Perhaps an individual's spiritual practice has become monotonous and uninteresting, and they perceive a sense of distance from God. Encouraging individuals to use their creativity in their spiritual journey, fostering a heightened awareness of the natural world, and exploring novel approaches to engaging with scripture has the potential to unveil fresh insights and previously concealed revelations of the divine. Spiritual Direction revolves "fostering discovery" around the core principle of facilitating the exploration and recognition of God's communication with an individual, emphasizing the significance of this discovery in the relationship. "The Lord is mystery, the wholly Other ...and we assume that he wants to relate to his people." The director has the ability to assist the directee in exploring and revealing their own connection with God.

Ideally, an individual seeking spiritual guidance desires a meditative connection with God, where they are open to relinquishing their own concerns and those of others, and instead concentrate on God during their prayer. The director motivates them to express their desires and attentively observe and listen for God's manifestation. "To pray for the Lord's self-revelation opens the person up to the mystery of the Other. To contemplate means to try to let God be Himself and not our projection of him." It is necessary to have a receptive attitude towards the enigmatic nature of God.

Exceptional occurrences of miraculous signs, extraordinary visions, and prophetic revelations may manifest. "However, they are only manifestations of the message sent by the spirit to the individual's innermost being. Excessive fixation on miraculous occurrences may significantly divert an individual's focus from pursuing the source rather than the object of interest. Spiritual Directors provide assistance in the process of discernment, which involves differentiating between the transmission of divine messages and their interpretation". It is crucial to be able to distinguish between the influence of the devil, one's own desires, and the guidance of God's Holy Spirit.

"To unmask and reject the tempter is the task of the contemplative and the one who guides." In 1 John 4:1 we read, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God."

The meditative experience, however, is firmly rooted in the mundane aspects of daily existence. This kind of prayer is integral to a dynamic lifestyle, since it involves contemplating the Lord's compassion for the others with whom one is engaged. The primary function of a spiritual director is to encourage an individual's progression towards contemplation and the direct experience of God's divine bestowal - grace.

Responses from Questionnaire- I sought to ascertain the contemporary manifestations of individuals' encounters with the divine. I had a meeting with four individuals who belong to four distinct religious groups: Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, and Anglican. I inquired about the factors that persuade you of the existence of God. All respondents provided explanations that included emotional, physical, cognitive, and other subjective reactions. For instance, experiencing an inexplicable tranquility, joy, and contentment even in challenging and gloomy circumstances, a profound awareness of His existence, a deep understanding of being cherished and embraced by Him, a profound sense of His love and involvement in my life, an inner intuition that directed me towards the right words to communicate with others, an overwhelming surge of happiness that was on the verge of bursting, and a profound bodily sensation of certainty. Each of them succinctly conveys the enigmatic existence of a Divine Being.



These remarkable individuals then expressed how their prayers have evolved throughout the years. They elucidated their practice of praying frequently throughout the day, rather than adhering to fixed schedules. They emphasized their reliance on God when experiencing worry or concern, directing their thoughts to prayer. Furthermore, they expressed heightened awareness of divine guidance during prayer and a newfound trust in its efficacy. They have acquired the skill of prayer and shifted their focus from personal shortcomings to a greater emphasis on God. Their prayers transitioned from being mechanistic and goal-oriented (like to a shopping list) to being spontaneous and integrated throughout the day. The text remains focused on scripture, with a reduced sense of urgency and a greater emphasis on the relationship with God.

Notably, the individuals in question understood God's existence primarily via their many encounters with a palpable sense of God's presence. I was taken aback by this and discovered that the one hour I spent with each individual passed rapidly. Being in their presence was a source of joy and honor, and it reaffirms my belief that many Christians in various denominations have a mystical encounter with God. Both interviewees, representing religions with contrasting theological perspectives, had personal encounters with the divine presence. Both individuals described an intense and inexplicable feeling of joy. Mystics may be found among several religious groups. Their encounter with the divine transcends the divisions that separate many religious customs. I anticipated a more robust correlation between mysticism and Catholicism compared to the connection between Protestants and mysticism. Nevertheless, contemporary Protestants described a nearly comparable or quite similar encounter with mysticism. These individuals could confidently assert that they experienced the existence of God in their life, independent of theological instruction. They had encountered the concealed manifestation of Christ in their lives.

My own discovery continued- I have come to observe biblical passages, such as Galatians 2:20. In a fresh perspective, I contemplate the profound statement: "I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live, I live by faith in the son of God who died and gave himself for me," The presence of Christ inside me, the embodiment of God's essence, remains steadfast and has a profound impact on me each day. I have been acquainted with this passage and others for an extended period, committing them to memory when I first embraced Christianity. However, I have never really perceived them in the context of Christ's genuine presence inside me. I concur with Karl Rahner's concept of 'everyday mysticism,' which refers to the concealed grace that accompanies me on a daily basis, representing the invisible Holy Mystery of love. Mysticism manifests in instances of exceptional lucidity, fleeting encounters with complete fusion of intellect, essence, and transcendence, a profound awareness of self and an Other, instances where our hearts soar in rapture, perceiving a novel realm; these are bestowed blessings that we can all encounter as we traverse the path of contemplation. These influences originate both within and outside, beyond temporal boundaries, but firmly rooted in our daily connection with God.

Conclusion- This endeavor has proven to be really fulfilling. This reinforces my belief in the contemporary notion that mysticism is not exclusive to the privileged few, but rather accessible to all individuals who adhere to the teachings of Jesus. I have tried to provide a precise definition of mysticism by examining the experiences of mystics spanning from ancient times to the present day. The conversation on spiritual guidance and mysticism highlighted the crucial responsibility of a spiritual director in assisting a person who want to delve into their connection with the divine.

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 2. Johnston, William: Arise, My Love...Mysticism For a New Era; pg 90 He is an Irish Jesuit, has lived more than forty years in Japan. A professor of religious studies and director of the Institute of Oriental Religions of Sophia University, he has lectured world-wide on East-West mysticism.
 3. Ibid. pg 101
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 10. Op cit. Downey pg 290
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 16. Steindl-Rast, David: Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer; pg 86
 17. RSV James 4:8 "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you."
 18. Carroll Patricia: Moving Mysticism to the Centre; pg 45 Patricia Carroll works in a London parish and is Course director in Education for Parish Service. She holds an MA in Christian Spirituality from Heythrop College, University of London, and has a keen interest in Karl Rahner.
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 32. Op cit. Barry & Connolly pg 63
 33. Appendix 1 for full questionnaire
 34. Catholic and Pentecostal
