

IS MYSTICISM FOR EVERYONE?

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IN HIS BOOK about Anglicanism, Roger Scruton makes the off-hand remark that Anglicanism, like Catholicism, is pitched at the average sinner. There is, regrettably, in the popular church at least, a view which is very close to that, which is that a deeper religious life may appeal to a small minority of people, and, if they are serious about it, they can go to a convent or monastery and work on it.

But the great mass of believers is in fact satisfied with something less: with avoiding serious sin and doing what you have to do to be saved. And that is compatible with leading a happy, constructive life in the world, without having to do anything extra.

There are some hazy assumptions built into this, one of which is that asceticism is somehow linked to mysticism, and that is not compatible with an ordinary life. Asceticism seems to mean giving things up in a big way, leading an austere life, something different from the contemporary life which is strong on barbecues, beaches, cars and holidays.

If that's the kind of thing you have to do without to become a mystic, no wonder it has limited appeal. Granted, in order to become a mystic, one has to take virtue seriously. In popular parlance, one has to be earnest about being good. But that is compatible with being a fun loving person. St Teresa, one of the world's greatest mystics, was fun to be with:

Teresa was a warm, human person, a little tubby, bright eyed, vivacious, and fun to be with. She would play the tambourine and dance with her 'daughters'; they would greet her with song.¹

Many of the Islamic mystics were married. One reads that chief rabbis are often mystics, and they would be married. In the

Muslim world, the late President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, was strongly attracted to mysticism, as are many Muslims and Christians living in the workaday world to-day. Although discipline is needed for mysticism, asceticism is not.

That is borne out by Alister Hardy's memorable book *The Spiritual Nature of Man, A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984). Hardy was a professor of biology at Oxford. By a curious coincidence, he was head of department when Richard Dawkins arrived there as an undergraduate. Dawkins remembers him as 'genial but batty-looking'. Hardy had a good excuse. He had survived the First World War, which had moved him to spend the rest of his life seeking a reconciliation between religion and evolution.

The reconciliation, he came to believe, is that religion is a source of fitness in the biological sense, since one who has communicated with God is stronger, and religious experience contributes to that. In order to find out what kinds of religious experience are current in contemporary society, Hardy put notices in London papers inviting people to send in descriptions of their religious experience.

He received thousands, which, like a diligent biologist, he set about classifying. Here is one: 'I felt caught up into some tremendous sense of being within a loving, triumphant and shining purpose.' (p.53) There is an interesting contrast between what Hardy expected to find and what he actually found. What he was expecting was a 'continuing feeling of a transcendental reality or of a divine presence' but what he mostly received were descriptions of brief, dramatic experiences. Sometimes,

though, he received both:

As far back as I can remember I have never had a sense of separation from the spiritual force I now choose to call God... From the age of about 6 to 12 in places of quiet and desolation this feeling of 'oneness' often passed to a state of 'listening. I mean by 'listening' that I was suddenly alerted to something that was going to happen. What followed was a sense of tremendous exaltation in which time seemed to stand still. (p. 20)

These descriptions came from ordinary citizens going about their everyday lives.

Is there anything we can do to open ourselves to such experiences? Spiritual writers stress that one must be striving to lead a good

1. John Ferguson, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mysticism and the Mystery Religions*. Thames and Hudson, London. 1976. p.194



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life. And strong motivation is required. Need can supply that. We should ask God to reveal Himself to us.

Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Preface to the twelfth edition)

Since this book first appeared, nineteen years ago [1911], the study of mysticism—not only in England, but also in France, Germany and Italy—has been almost completely transformed. From being regarded, whether critically or favourably, as a byway of religion, it is now more and more generally accepted by theologians, philosophers and psychologists, as representing in its intensive form the essential religious experience of man.

The labours of a generation of religious psychologists—following, and to some extent superseding the pioneer work of William James—have already done much to disentangle its substance from the psycho-physical accidents which often accompany mystical apprehension. Whilst we are less eager than our predecessors to dismiss all accounts of abnormal experience as the fruit of superstition or disease, no responsible student now identifies the mystic and the ecstatic; or looks upon visionary and other 'extraordinary phenomena' as either guaranteeing or discrediting the witness of the mystical saints.

Even the remorseless explorations and destructive criticisms of the psycho-analytic school are now seen to have effected a useful work; throwing into relief the genuine spiritual activities of the psyche, while explaining in a naturalistic sense some of their less fortunate psycho-physical accompaniments.