

MYSTICISM AND THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

A mystic is often thought to be someone lost to reality, head in the clouds, full of frothy, misty notions. Yet if we examine the writings left by great mystics throughout history, we find that real mysticism is practical, objective and scientific. Mystics instead turn out to be among the humans who have most dedicated themselves to the search for truth and reality and are among today's great scientists, except that the questions they ask are different. Mystics only concern themselves with humanity's ultimate questions, ones that fester in everyone: Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? Where has this consciousness of mine come from, and what happens to it at death? What is true? What is real? Mystics are like scientists in another way: they are not satisfied with words or promises, but insist on verifying every theory by their own experience, seeing and hearing the truth with their own eyes and ears, so to speak.

If this is true, then the question naturally arises: what have these mystics – who include among their number many of humanity's most renowned religious leaders, philosophers, and thinkers—discovered over the millennia of their endeavors? If we turn to their writings, we find an extraordinary unanimity on many points – extraordinary given the diversity of cultures, times and places from which their voices come down to us. Indeed, the unity of their account is strong testimony to the validity of their discoveries.

One point on which all mystics agree is that no one, not even the accomplished mystics themselves, can simply tell us the answers we seek. This is, they say, partly because the answers cannot be captured in our ordinary words and concepts and partly because they must be experienced. Just as no parent can learn for his child, similarly each of us has to grow to see these truths for ourselves. While others can offer us guidance on where to look, and even suggest what we will learn, still the looking and learning must be our own.

A second point mystics insist on is that the answers we seek, indeed all true knowledge, can be found nowhere outside us but must be uncovered deep within our own consciousness. Socrates declared, "Know thyself." Mystics tell us that this self-knowledge is the first step in discovering the Lord. They make a most astounding claim: they say that God, the Ultimate Reality and Truth, himself dwells within us. As Christ said, "The Kingdom of God is within you," and the Qur'an reads, "We are nearer to [man] than his jugular vein." Guru Arjan, the fifth in the line of Sikh gurus, wrote: "He who believes in God as Truth in his heart knows the essence of the Creator, the Cause of causes." Kabir Sahib, the great Indian poet and saint, wrote:

*Complete, entire, and ever present
Is the one true Lord
Within the body of each man—
The Lord who is beyond all bonds.*

This wondrous statement, of course, meets instant doubt in us: if God is within us, how then can we be unaware of him? This leads to another point on which mystics speak as one: we are under the spell of a deluded mind. It is our disordered thoughts that drown out reality and muffle God's inner voice. The Theosophist Madame Blavatsky wrote, "the Mind is the great Slayer of the Real." Mystics tell us that the purpose of human life is to overcome this delusion here and now, and they show us how. They teach various forms of prayer or meditation by which ordinary human beings can still their thoughts, develop inner calm and concentration, and gradually become aware of God's presence. In the Psalms God says, "Be still, and know that I am God."

Another point of unanimity among mystics, handed down over the long reach of human experience, is that a life of purity and mental discipline is necessary for seeking truth. Immoral acts hold us back in several ways. One is because we have to account for our actions. Our actions require recompense. Indian scriptures call this the law of karma, or cause and effect; Christ explains it as "As you sow, so shall you reap." Immorality is also an obstacle because only a pure mind sees God within. Therefore mystics urge us to adhere to the highest precepts of morality, among them vegetarianism, avoiding all intoxicants, and earning our own living.

Finally, mystics always insist that we seek guidance on our journey from another human being who has already traveled it. Though we must make the journey ourselves, still, as in other difficult areas of endeavor, a living guide is essential. The true spiritual seeker will look for a guide who knows the way, who can teach spirituality, no matter his race, sect, or country of origin. As the Muslim mystic Rumi wrote: "If you wish to go on a pilgrimage, go with one who has already made it, whether he be a Hindu, a Turk or an Arab."