Everyday Mysticism: Finding the Divine in Daily Life

Presented by Fr. Anthony Ciorra, Ph.D.
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Fr. Anthony Ciorra
Ph.D., Fordham University
Sacred Heart University

Fr. Anthony Ciorra is a leading expert on Catholic spirituality. He is the author of *Everyday Mysticism* (Crossroad 1995) and coauthor of *Moral Formation in the Parish* (Alba House 1999). In recognition of his ministry in the Church, Pope John Paul II gave him the pontifical honor *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* in 1999. He was awarded the Caritas Centennial Award in 2000 for his work in lay ministry and the Spirit of RENEW Award for his work in interreligious dialogue and ecumenism.

Fr. Ciorra has graduate degrees in psychology, spirituality, and pastoral theology, a Ph.D. in Historical Theology from Fordham University, and a Certificate in Spiritual Direction. He is Assistant Vice President for Mission and Catholic Identity at Sacred Heart University. Previously he was dean of the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University, director of the Center for Theological and Spiritual Development at the College of St. Elizabeth, and director of the Center for Spiritual Development for the Archdiocese of New York.

His experience has included parish life, teaching, administration, retreat work, preaching, and formation ministries. He gives workshops and retreats throughout the world and is active in creating programs for interreligious dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims.
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Course Overview

“In the days ahead, you will either be a mystic or nothing at all.”
– Karl Rahner

Gain a deeper understanding of the mystical experience in this must-have course. There is something elusive about the word “mysticism.” An ancient tradition within Christianity, it defies a narrow and precise definition: there are as many definitions of mysticism as there are mystics.

In this course, you will explore one form of mysticism: “everyday mysticism,” as it was called by twentieth-century theologian Karl Rahner. Presented by Fr. Anthony Ciorra, the author of Everyday Mysticism, these lectures will help you find God in the midst of daily life. As you will come to understand, we are called not to be extraordinary mystics but extraordinary human beings who experience God in ordinary ways.

We often think of mystics as superhuman persons who have paranormal experiences like visions, ecstasy, and stigmata. When you look at such saints as Thérèse of Lisieux, however, you will see that to be a mystic is to occupy the core of human experience. Genuine mysticism does not necessarily consist of experiences, but rather expresses itself in a passionate love for God, who knocks at the door of the human heart.

In these 12 lectures, you will explore a selection of mystical writings that express the human experience of God. As you review these sources, you will discover that they have both common threads and clear differences. In doing so, you come to understand that God is a mystery who can never be fully defined. You will look to the tradition for parameters and guideposts along the path that leads to God.

Fr. Ciorra’s presentations will lead you to a deeper appreciation of how you are already a mystic. Discover your own inner mysticism today in this inspiring, yet practical course.
Topic 1. Everyday Mysticism

Overview

This topic will explain my long-standing interest on the topic of mysticism. My book, *Everyday Mysticism*, was my first attempt to develop and express my thinking on this topic. The more I experienced life and listened to others, the more I began to reshape my understanding of holiness and spirituality.

I. Vatican II and New Definitions of Holiness

- The watershed moment at the Second Vatican Council was the discussion on holiness. The Council Fathers began the discussion in the context of the religious life.

- They changed course midstream and moved the discussion into the document on the Church (*Lumen gentium*). The clarion all of the Council was what the fathers called “the universal call to holiness.” Holiness would not be confined to monasteries and convents but would open up to the entire world. Everyone is called to holiness. For Christians, because of their baptism, holiness is connected to their relationship to Jesus as the one that leads them to God. However, all other religious traditions are also called to be in relationship to God and to embark on the path to holiness.

- *Gaudium et Spes*: the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World

II. Contemporary Psychology

- I suggest in this conference that it is not a spirituality of perfection but rather a spirituality of imperfection colors our lives. We do not go to God as equals, but rather we go in our brokenness. It is there we discover our need for God. It is in our brokenness and imperfections that God meets us and calls us to Himself, as the one who loves us unconditionally.

- It is the experience of this love that is at the heart of mystical experience. We go from the head to the heart, the place where God lives.

III. Karl Rahner

- It was Karl Rahner who first used the phrase “everyday mysticism.” This was a groundbreaking development in that he made the leap from a classical understanding of mysticism into a broader definition. He suggested that mysticism is about religious experience and that all are invited into the experience of the transcendent God.

- This does not diminish the fact that there do exist mystics in the classical or narrow sense (visions, ecstasy, locutions, etc.). However, that is not to say that those who do not have those
particular experiences are not also mystics. These experiences that happen in the midst of the ordinariness of everyday life are nonetheless authentic experiences of the divine.

iv. Contemplation

- I will underscore the centrality of contemplation as a way of praying that is meant for all of us.
- Thérèse of Lisieux and Thomas Merton, two very different people writing a century apart, both come to the same conclusion: Contemplation is meant for all. It may mean different things for different people, but nonetheless it is about our relationship with God.
- Merton points out that we should be careful not to talk or write too much about prayer. He says to just do it and don’t judge it or compare it to others.

v. Seeking the Gift of Wisdom

- Finally, I invite participants on a Sabbath journey throughout this course. I note that Solomon prays for the gift of wisdom (1 Kings 3:4-15).
- Wisdom is seeing the connection between things. In a sense, wisdom, holiness, and spirituality are all about the same thing, that is, the mystical journey.

*Dream of Solomon* by Luca Giordano, ca. 1693
Reflection Questions

1. Make two columns on a piece of paper. In column one, list the ways you think you are holy. In column two, list the ways that you think you need to change to become holier.

2. What are your imperfections? How can you find God through them?

3. Think about your preconceptions of holiness, and how your parents/grandparents modeled (or failed to model) holiness. What is your definition? What does it mean for you to be holy?
Topic 2. The Mystical Journey

Overview

This session will explore the two significant questions: “What does it mean to be a mystic?” and “What is the journey that one must travel to become a mystic?” The way we answer these two questions will determine the path we take and the God that we seek. I suggest that we need to examine the ways in which mysticism has been defined over the centuries and how we might bring our understanding to its next and deeper level.

I. Divergent Understandings of the Term “Mysticism”

- When we look at the wide scope of understanding and definitions, we come to recognize that there are many paths from which to choose.
- For example, when speaking of mysticism, Thomas Aquinas speaks of the knowledge of God through experience.
- Otto Pfleiderer defines mysticism as the “immediate feeling of the unity of the self with God.”
- A. J. Arberry defines it as a “constant and unvarying phenomenon of the universal yearning of the human spirit for personal communion with God.”
- Rufus Jones defines it as the type of religion that places the emphasis on immediate relation with God: on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence.
- Edward Caird
- Some definitions will emphasize feeling rather than rationality. Evelyn Underhill gives a nuanced definition: “Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in a greater or less degree; or aims at and believes in such attainment.”

II. Mystical and Spiritual

- The more we delve into the topic, the more we find that there are times when mysticism and spirituality can be used interchangeably.
- There are many types of mystical spirituality. The important thing is not to get lost in words that distance us from the experience of God. In a sense, it does not matter how we define the word; what matters is how we bring it into our daily lives.
III. The Elements of Mystical Experience

- At the same time, there are elements of the mystical experience from which common threads begin to emerge. These threads give us a method to examine the authenticity of our own experience.

- Common elements of the mystical experience:
  1. Practical
  2. Experiential
  3. Ineffable
  4. Non-conceptual
  5. Unitive
  6. Integrative
  7. Sapiential
  8. Certitude

IV. The Goals of the Mystical Journey

- The goal of the mystical journey will differ depending on who takes the journey. We will see later in the course that although the end is the same, the path is different for Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, etc.

- In the quest for the transcendent One, we engage with others in our world that show us God’s face from different angles. We should never study the mystical in isolation from the variety of traditions found in our modern global village.

- The religious person is the mystical person.
Reflection Questions

1. Having listened to this session, how has your view of mysticism been changed, deepened, or developed?

2. Since the way you define “mysticism” will determine your path, how do you define it? What does it mean to you?

3. Talk to someone of a religious tradition different from yours. Ask them: How do you pray? How do you define God? How does religion help or hinder you on the spiritual quest?
Topic 3. The Human Experience of God

Overview

In this topic, we will explore the relationship between theology, spirituality, and religious experience. Good theology should lead to spirituality, and good spirituality is rooted in good theology. The hinge between them is religious experience. In this session we will explore what we mean by “religious” and what we mean by “experience.” We will look at the concept of mystery, the experiences of grace and of God, and God’s desire for us.

I. Theology and Religious Experience

- St. Thomas Aquinas had a vision that he had of the crucified Christ at the end of his life. After this experience, he said that his Summa should be burned for it did not capture the beauty and wonder of God as experienced in his vision.

- Having visions is not a necessary component of religious experience. In the midst of the ordinary, God is always revealing Himself. God is best known not through dry conceptual discourse, but rather through loving, prayerful union. This experience bridges the gap between theology and spirituality.

II. The Mystery Dimension of Our Lives

- Our lives are filled with mystery: those areas where there is something deeper than what meets the eye.

- We encounter mystery in and through our day-to-day encounter with the world. The experiences of human love, birth, forgiveness, loneliness, death, etc., are all moments of a deeper encounter with the divine.

- Meetings with other human beings can be times when, like Abraham and Sarah, we find that we are entertaining angels.

III. The Experience of Grace

- God is knocking at the doors of our hearts through persons, places, and events that occur each day. We call such occurrences “grace.”

- Grace is at the heart of religious experience. Grace consists not of a thing or object, but rather opportunities that invite us to go deeper in our relationship with God.

IV. Jesus and the Experience of God

- Jesus models the human experience of God. He experiences God as “Abba.” This is the source and secret of His being, message and manner of life.
• He shows us that the reign of God is primarily concerned with an inbreaking of God into our world and into each of our lives.

• It is Jesus who sends us the gift of the Spirit, and the Spirit invites us into a relationship with Jesus, who brings us to his Abba; Jesus is the way to the Father.

Holy Trinity by Luca Rossetti da Orta, 1738–39

V. Social Structures

• The experience of God is not a private affair that isolates us from the world. On the contrary, ours is not a “privatized theology,” but one that is relational.

• We are jolted out of our complacency and thrust into the marketplace where God dwells. It is here, for example, that we find God as one who lives among the poor and the outcast. They become our teachers, the ones who show us the way to God.

VI. God’s Will and Desire for Us

• As we become more aware of who we are each day through our experience of life, we also become more sensitive to God’s will or God’s desire for us.

• The particular energy within each person, and the drives that he/she has, tell the person who they are in the heart and mind of God. All choices then become clear.

• We need to pay attention to the God who touches each of us daily and respond in a way that reinforces the authenticity of who we are.
Reflection Questions

1. Write about an experience that gave you a deeper sense of God’s presence.

2. Reflect on a relationship in your life where there is love, and on another relationship where there is a need for healing. Where is God?

3. What does God’s will/desire mean to you? What are some of the ways you have come to know God’s will in your life?
Topic 4. Practical Mysticism

Overview

We get to the heart of the matter in this session as we deal with the practical implications of the mystical life. How does one begin the mystical journey? What are the characteristics of the mystical personality? This is where the rubber meets the road. Answering these questions will give us a handle on the mystical path and provide some tools by which we can judge authentic mystical experiences.

I. The Primacy of Charity

- True prayer
- Love of God and love of neighbor

II. The Ego-Driven Life

- St. Paul writes about a spiritual warfare. To use contemporary terminology that includes insights from psychology, we speak of the battle that every human being has with the ego.
- In the first half of life we are generally ego-driven and have very little need for God.
- In the second half of life we begin to let go of the ego. To use religious language, this is the Paschal Mystery, entering into the dying and rising of the Lord Jesus.

III. The True and False Self

- The paradigm that we use is that of the True Self and the False Self.
- The True Self is the self as created by God that accepts our humanity and does not disguise it with masks.
- The False Self is all those things that we try to use as substitutes for God (e.g., power, sex, money, etc.), which ultimately obscure our true identity as children of God.

IV. Beyond Morality

- Authentic spiritual experiences will lead to an integrity in our daily lives that enhances our moral capacity. All major religions have a moral code.
- For the mystic, these are not legal prescriptions but rather ways of loving. It is what St. Augustine said so well, “Love and do as you will.”
- This is not a license to do as we please—it is freedom to walk a higher road. This road leads beyond morality, not bypassing it, but by going *beyond* it to a life of compassion.

**v. The Way of Compassion**

- The way of compassion is solidarity with all living things. There are no limits or boundaries to community.
- The mystic heart is open to all. There are no strangers: all are welcome.
- Indeed, this way of living is counter-cultural. In a world that is filled with violence, the mystical path is one of nonviolence; one that loves and respects all that God has created.

**vi. The Mystic Character**

- The mystic character manifests itself in several ways:
  1. Wisdom is the ability to see deeper: to see the connection between things.
  2. Sensitivity is the ability to feel deeper: to enter into the experience of the other.
- The wise and sensitive person is one who accepts others and is willing to enter into the lifelong process of forgiveness.

**vii. Who Are Saints?**

- Mystics are saints. They are not plastic statue saints feigning a false perfection but saints who, although scared, along the way are open to growth and solidarity with others.
- This is where the True Self leads you. It is the way of holiness.
Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on your own warfare between the true self and the false self. What are some of the ways that your ego leads you away from the true self?

2. What is morality for you? Rules and regulations or a way of loving?

3. What is the connection between mysticism and integrity?

4. Reflect on violence in our culture.

5. How does the mystical path challenge us to live nonviolently?
Topic 5. The Conspiracy of Silence

Overview

The tradition of the desert fathers and mothers is one that brings the human spirit into silence, and into the context of utter aloneness. This is the seedbed for religious experience; it sets the stage and offers a context for the authentic encounter with the transcendent. In this topic, we will look at the desert fathers and mothers, as well as modern-day mystics, who embraced silence.

I. The Wisdom of the Desert

- The flight into the desert in the fourth century was neither negative nor individualistic. Those who went into the desert were seeking something that society and the current culture simply were not offering.

- What they were actually seeking was the true self. In order to do this, they had to step back and engage in deep self-examination.

- Much of life is lived on the level of the False Self: the way we interact with the external world. We comply with acceptable modes of behavior and the rules for social interaction. We seek success and happiness in the ways the world will lead us.

- We go into the desert to find another path—one that leads to who we really are in the mind and heart of God. That is the True Self, the way that we were created.

II. Purity of Heart

- The goal of going deeper, and finding the True Self through silence, is to grow into purity of heart.

- There is a freedom that one receives through rest and quiet, which opens the heart up to the deeper prayer that leads one into the heart of God.

- It is in the quiet where the struggle between the True and False Selves takes place. The uncovering of the True Self and purity of heart are actually one and the same.
III. Wisdom

- This is ultimately the path to wisdom.

- Thomas Merton writes, “What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery; and without it all the rest are not only useless but disastrous.” (*Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 11)

IV. Choosing Silence

- Thus, silence is not an ascetical practice but a countercultural gesture, a symbol of an alternative lifestyle. Spending time in silence frees allows one to engage in authentic conversation rather than mere chatter.

- Silence gives us what culture cannot deliver. By withdrawing from the culture, we can make a difference when we return.

- All those who write about the spiritual life and prayer include the importance of silence: This is true of all religious traditions.

V. Spiritual Writers on Silence

- We conclude this section by citing some of the great writers, such as:
  1. Gustave Thibon
  2. William Hogan
  3. Thomas Merton
  4. Karl Rahner
  5. Henri Nouwen
  6. René Voillaume
Reflection Questions

1. Pay attention to silence today.

2. Which of the authors cited on silence resonates with you? Lean into your feelings.

3. Plan an extended period of silence, e.g., a retreat, recollection day, or holy hour.
Topic 6. A Spirituality of Nothingness

Overview

The mystic is one who lives and breathes in the context of darkness. This is not to say that darkness has value in and of itself, but rather that it is the place where we often find the presence of God. In the successes and happiness that come to us on good days, often we could say that we do not need God. In some respects, we begin to think that we are God during such times. It is only when things begin to fall apart that we begin to recognize our need for God.

I. What Is Darkness?

- Negative understandings/Jansenism
- Biblical foundations
- Positive places for encountering the Divine
- Suffering and pain: Finding meaning and God

II. The Paschal Mystery

- To place this concept of darkness and suffering in a liturgical context, we turn to the Paschal Mystery: entering into the dying and rising of the Lord Jesus.

- You might say that there is an awful lot of talk about suffering that borders on gloom and doom spirituality. It is not intended in this way. The fact of the matter is that, for most of us, we spend a good deal of time living in Holy Saturday. We do have our Good Friday and Easter Sunday moments, but these generally do not comprise the greater portion of our lives.

- We have the choice of fleeing or embracing these moments.

III. The Experience of the Mystics

- Many of the great saints and mystics give testimony to this reality. For example:
  1. The Carmelite mystics, Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, and Thérèse of Lisieux all witness that the deeper experiences of God are often found in those dark moments of Good Friday, and especially Holy Saturday.
  2. St. Thérèse of Lisieux’s simple way shows how we can learn to love in the midst of pain and hard moments.
  3. St. Francis of Assisi and St. Ignatius of Loyola both discovered God when wounded in battle.
4. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta spent most of her life—well over fifty years—living in a state of mild depression, and sometimes even wondering about the existence of God.

- The list goes on and on. Look to your own life and see if this does not ring true for you.

IV. The Experience of Nothingness

- It is in the experience of nothingness that we find something beyond ourselves.

- The sense of nothingness that comes from loneliness, boredom, depression, anxiety, and guilt has the potential to make us bitter—or make us saints. It is in moments such as these that we go to that empty spot deep within. The invitation is to stay there and not to run away.

- In our culture we often look for “relief” in entertainment, clinging to others or addictive substances. If we have the courage to stay in those moments, this can bring us to the mystical, the experience of the transcendent, which comes to us in the middle of the night and brings light, love, and peace.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897)
Reflection Questions

1. Think of a painful moment in your life. How did you deal with it? Where did it lead you? Would you do anything differently in hindsight?

2. What do you tell family and friends when they live in the Good Friday moments of life? What are the ways that you can be present to them in such moments?

3. St. Thérèse of Lisieux learned how to love through the suffering of her life. Her way is called the “Little Way.” What are your thoughts about how the mystics understand love as opposed to the popular culture?
Topic 7. The Symphony of the Word

Overview

This session will approach the scriptures from a mystical perspective. The interest here is not on the historical-critical method of interpretation, or even the use of scripture for creative meditation using the senses. The mystics were often nourished by sacred texts. In this instance, I will refer to the Judeo-Christian use of the Bible: the Torah and the Christian scriptures.

I. Symphony of the Word

- The Japanese have an expression, “Don’t mistake the finger that is pointing to the moon.” Sacred texts are fingers pointing to the moon. They are launching pads that led to new places within the human spirit.

- In this sense, the scriptures feed the mystic spirit with the beauty and splendor of the Transcendent. It is not about reading texts, but as St. Bernard of Clairvaux so beautifully expressed, it is about chewing on a word and preparing oneself for visits of the Word. This sentiment is reflected in Franciscan preaching and laude.

- We can view the scriptures as God’s “love letters.”

- The first naiveté is looking at sacred texts on only the surface, literal and lifeless reading. The second naiveté is going deeper into the text.

- In a sense, it has less to do with what a text says but rather where it leads you. In his apostolic exhortation Verbum Domini, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI refers to the scriptures as a symphony. He uses the image of music, the harmony among notes as the hermeneutic, the way of encountering beauty in the word of God. He writes that “the tradition of Christian thought has developed this key element of the symphony of the word, as when St. Bonaventure, who in the great tradition of the Greek Fathers sees all the possibilities of creation present in the Logos, states that, ‘Every creature is a Word of God since it proclaims God.’”

- In other words, the Word is meant not so much to be read as to be experienced.

II. The Hebrew Scriptures

- In this topic, we will apply this method of mystical reading to the sacred texts.

- The Hebrew Scriptures invite us into various ways of looking at God, e.g., Creator, Judge, Redeemer, Lord of History, etc. The mystic takes all of these views and highlights the immanence of the Transcendent One.

- Humans are called to constant conversion and a way of life that reflects a moral communion with God and others.
• We will emphasize the Book of Job, in which the mystic struggles with the mystery of evil and the ultimate understanding that God’s ways are not our ways.

• The Psalms are the place where the mystic finds him/herself most at home. This is a mystical book par excellence in the Old Testament, scanning a myriad of feelings and images of God.

III. The Synoptic Gospels

• We will look at the New Testament books, the synoptics, and the writings of St. John and St. Paul.

• The stories of the synoptics elicit the child in us who plays with parables and events that are always about something more than they appear to be.

IV. The Mysticism of Paul and John

• In contrast, St. Paul and St. John develop a spiritual theology and vocabulary that is a mystic’s delight. These texts lend themselves to a deeper reading that brings us into unknown places for an encounter with the divine. In fact, St. Paul and St. John were both mystics in their own right, and their writings lead us down that path.

• When reading sacred texts in this manner, therefore, we espouse a spirituality that is not the passive experience of the Divine, but rather our active reception of God’s love. You are invited to read not with the eyes, but rather with a mystical heart.

*Saint Paul* by Adam Elsheimer, 1604
Reflection Questions

1. You need to slow down in order to read a poem. In a sense, all poems are mystical texts. Choose a poem and simply be with it, let it slowly sink in.

2. Go to any sacred text and read it out loud. Notice a word or line that strikes you. Then, as St. Bernard writes, “Chew on that word.”

3. Choose any one of the Psalms. Because the Psalms were meant to be sung, sing it, either using a familiar melody or making one up.
Topic 8. Holy Reading

Overview

This session introduces the listener to an ancient and tested way of reading that we call *Lectio Divina*, or “Holy Reading.” This session will build on the previous topic and give you tools that can be used for a mystical reading of sacred texts. We will look at the concept of leisure, as well as the writings of the Church Fathers.

I. Leisure

- Leisure is the context that is needed to approach texts in this way of holy reading.
- This may seem obvious, but in today’s culture, leisure has become a lost art. You might say that the most important role for mystics right now is to model the importance of leisure and highlight the dramatic difference that it can make in one’s life.
- It is the path to wisdom, rather than the mere accumulation of facts, that we call learning. Of all the things he could have asked for, Solomon asked for the gift of wisdom. This is the gift that we seek through the contemplative reading of texts—*Lectio Divina*.

II. *Lectio Divina*

- There are many explanations of *Lectio*, but they all boil down to the same basic principles.
  1. It begins with choosing a text. I like to look at it as a text choosing us.
  2. Once the text is chosen, enter into silence and place yourself in a comfortable position.
  3. Then read the text slowly, savoring every word.
  4. Allow the text to enter into your heart.
  5. Then notice a word or phrase that touches you; stay with that word and speak to God.
  6. Finally, just be there, resting in God’s loving embrace.

III. Commentary on the Song of Songs

- We will look at some texts from scripture to illustrate Holy Reading. We go back to Origen and take some of his texts on the Song of Songs.
- You might say that this is the mystical book par excellence, filled with rich symbols that require a close and deep reading of the text: love’s language, the inner and outer personae, the spiritual senses, and love and charity.
- Origen’s sacred reading of the text leads him to the marriage and covenant symbols.
iv. Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses

- We conclude by looking at Gregory of Nyssa’s *The Life of Moses*. Moses is the mystic who leads us to the burning bush where he experiences the Transcendence of God (theophany). Gregory of Nyssa presents the patriarch as the model of mystical ascent to God.

- He invites us to a holy reading of the texts in which, like Moses, we take off our shoes before the sacred. The mystical experience of Moses was not just his own; it was the experience of the whole people of Israel.

- Gregory invites us to a holy reading in which we can climb the mountain where God will speak to us face-to-face, as one speaks to a friend.

*The Burning Bush* by Sébastien Bourdon, 17th century
Reflection Questions

1. Spend a day of leisure with no rules or plans. Just let the day happen.

2. Practice Lectio Divina as outlined in this presentation.

3. Write down your reflections after your Lectio Divina practice. Write what touched you, new ideas, and what it felt like to just be with God in contemplation with “nothing” happening.
Topic 9. Mystics as Instruments of Peace

Overview

The mystical is one that leads to harmony and convergence among religions. The reason is that the mystic does not focus on doctrine, but rather religious experience. On the level of religious experience, it is the one God that we all encounter regardless of race, religion, economic status or nationality.

I. Religion and World Peace

- Religion at its worst is a great source of violence in the world. As one author wrote about the Middle East, “The gods are at war with one another.” It is only the dialogue among religions that will bring about peace in the world. It is the mystical component within religious traditions that has the capacity to make this happen.

- It is interesting that fundamentalists within all traditions are skeptical, and at times even hostile, towards mystical experience. You cannot control the mystic, and you cannot put parameters around their experience of God.

- Madeleine Albright: Engaging and interpreting the text

II. Some Personal Experiences

- In this session, I share some personal experiences of inter-religious dialogue and its impact on my personal life, as well as on the larger community. This is especially true of the Jewish-Christian-Islamic triadogue. I share experiences where walls have come down and doors have been opened through the sharing of prayer among these traditions.
  1. Iowa
  2. Children of Abraham
  3. Small human communities
  4. Chautauqua

- The sacred texts of each tradition, correctly interpreted, promote: peace, brotherhood, and reconciliation.

III. Vatican II

- The Second Vatican Council clearly endorsed dialogue among all religions in its decrees on ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. The Council took place over fifty years ago.
  1. Nostra aetate
2. Ecumenism

- It is Pope Francis who has inherited the vision of the council, and he is carrying it forth with courage and clarity in his outreach to other religious traditions. He reflects the mystical view that sees and affirms the connections between things.

**IV. The Mystical Path**

- The final segment of this session draws from the some of the great thinkers who affirm the mystical path as the way to peace. We will bring into the conversation:
  1. St. Bonaventure
  2. St. Francis and the Crusades
  3. Miroslav Volf
  4. Rene Girard
  5. Thomas Merton
  6. Karen Armstrong
  7. Nicholas of Cusa
Reflection Questions

1. Read the work of one mystic from a tradition other than your own.

2. Peacemaking is the “ministry” of the mystic. Think of ways that you can promote world peace and reconciliation among religions in your community.

3. Attend a prayer service of a religious tradition other than your own. Reflect on how you felt. For example, do you feel at home? Afraid? Confused? Out of place? After doing this, promote, in whatever way you can, an interfaith gathering in your community.
Topic 10. Prophetic Mysticism

Overview

It is difficult to categorize mystics. This is not to exclude the possibility that the mystic can be the prophet. However, the prophetic role is distinct and might even be too narrow for the mystic. In this topic, we will look at the three Abrahamic traditions—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity—as merging the prophetic and mystical and thus bringing about a new reality.

I. Mystics and Prophets

- The French Jesuit Henri-Marie Cardinal de Lubac wrote that “the mystic is the very opposite of the prophet: The prophet receives and transmits the word of God to which he adheres through faith; the mystic is sensitive to an inner light that exempts him from believing. The two are incompatible.”
- This is because “mysticism eases away at myth, and eventually the mystic can do without it; he tosses it away like an empty shell, while remaining indulgent toward those who still need it.”
- While respectful of the sacred texts and the institution of religion, the mystic moves to a deeper place.

II. Similarities and Differences in the Abrahamic Traditions

- We continue to focus on the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity).
- As noted earlier in the course, we see that these religions come together in the mystical tradition. Each is different, yet each is the same.
  1. Monotheists
  2. People of the Book
  3. Worship

III. Jewish Mysticism

- The way of Judaism is the way of holiness. We discover in the Hebrew Scriptures an evolving understanding of God, and the mystics are at the heart of this evolution.
- At one time thought of as terrifying, God in the kabbalistic tradition has instead a judgmental side, but is also the God of transcendent mercy and majesty.
- What is compelling in Jewish mystical thought and practice is that the passion of God for humanity is seen primarily as a demand for justice and righteousness in human relations.
IV. Islamic Mysticism

- The way of Islam is the way of passion. The very notion of Islam means peace, which is found only when we surrender totally to God.
- The Qur’an, both in its structure and its metaphorical language, dedicates itself to transmitting a living sense of God’s both beautiful and terrible grandeur—grandeur that is forever beyond any human being’s ability to understand or imitate.
- The Sufi mystics are the torchbearers of this vision, which stems from their experience of the transcendent.

![Muslim Prayer Beads. Photo by Muhammad Rehan / CC BY-SA 2.0](image)

V. Christian Mysticism

- The way of Christianity is the way of love in action.
- The Christian tradition captures incarnational principles and the feminine nature of God by its emphasis on Mary.
- At its best, the Christian tradition emphasizes in the interconnection of all life.
- The experience of the transcendent expresses itself in the incarnation of God in the details of everyday life.
Reflection Questions

1. In what ways is the mystical path unique and different from the prophetic mission?

2. In what ways is the mystic part of the institution? In what ways is the mystic set apart from the institution?

3. Choose one of the mystical texts referred to in this session, and go deeper with the text in your prayer.
Topic 11. Cosmic Mysticism

Overview

The mystic lives in the concrete world and is keenly aware of the interconnection between all things; the earth is sacred ground. Thus, a mystic like St. Francis of Assisi walked barefoot out of reverence for the ground upon which he walked. Karl Rahner wrote that the future belongs to the mystics, and that on some level we are all called to be mystics. Thus, he coined the phrase “everyday mysticism.” In this sense, he taught that we are not human beings having a spiritual experience: we are spiritual beings having a human experience.

I. Cosmic Mysticism

- Ecological consciousness.
- A cosmic mysticism takes seriously the doctrine of creation. An ecological spirituality leads to gratitude for the wonder of creation and our role as stewards of that which God has given us.
- Ecologists show how closely related various systems of plants, animals, and human beings are.
- The human impact of chemical and biological realities on animal and plant life.

II. Contemplation and Ecology

- To be fully human in the twenty-first century will require us to be even more intimately involved with caring for the earth.
- Cosmic mysticism sees the holiness in science as grounding humans in the evolution of the universe. Teilhard de Chardin is a champion of this point of view, which sees the divine energy moving all of creation towards the Omega point as the goal of all of creation.
- Contemplation is the non-pragmatic regard of creatures.
- When we contemplate the land and sea, we open ourselves to the presence of the transcendent.

III. The Future Belongs to the Mystic

- Evelyn Underhill refers to the mystic as the creative artist. She writes that “the artist is the one who sees things in their native purity.”
- The mystic has eyes that see beyond the veil that separates us humans from everything surrounding us. The mystic sees deeper, and thus brings a poetic vision to the prose of the universe.
• With human eyes we look at H2O and see water. St. Francis of Assisi brings a poet’s eyes and sees H2O as “Sister Water.” Everything, in being what it is, is symbolic of something more. All of nature is speaking of something more. A falling leaf is a symbol of human mortality; a flowing river can remind us of the stream of life.

• There is an evolving impulse of the universe.

iv. The Mystic as Creative Artist

• William Blake, “Cleanse the doors of perception, so that everything may appear as it is— infinite.”

• The artist is the one who sees things in their native purity.

v. Nature Mysticism and Symbolism

• The mystic brings harmony out of discord.

• Nature is the language in which God expresses his thoughts.

vi. St. Francis of Assisi as Nature Mystic

• This section concludes with a reflection on St. Francis of Assisi and his “Canticle of Brother Sun.” This is a literary masterpiece that powerfully reflects the mystic vision of the universe.

• It is interesting that St. Francis of Assisi lived in the same time period as the Sufi mystic, Rumi. There is a synergy between this magnificent poetic text and Rumi’s poetry on the beauty of the universe.

Legend of St. Francis, Sermon to the Birds by Giotto, 1266–1337
**Reflection Questions**

1. Go on a nature walk. Try to move out of your head and look at the world from the eyes of your heart.

2. Read and pray with St. Francis’s “Canticle of the Brother Sun.”

3. Tap into the mystic artist within you and do something creative from your experience of nature, e.g., write a poem, draw a picture, or sit in contemplation.
Topic 12. Mystics in the World

Overview

This brings us to the conclusion of the course. We end where we began, that is, in the world. The whole point of mysticism is not that we become otherworldly, but rather this-worldly. Dom Chapman, the famed Benedictine monk, said it well when he wrote, “If you need to know how you are doing, look to the charity of your life.” We can translate this as meaning that the mystic does not escape the world, but rather embraces it.

I. The Covenant

- At the heart of the mystical way is the covenant that God has made with us, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” This is God’s invitation for us to be in relationship with him.
- It is the invitation to intimacy, which is ultimately God’s desire for us.
- In the New Testament, Jesus tells us that he no longer calls us servants; he calls us friends. This is the beginning and end of the mystical experience: friendship with God. It is the whole point of conversion, the change of heart or the turning of the heart over to God. It is inviting God into the center of life. This conversion is a revolution of consciousness.

II. Metanoia

- Bernard Lonergan expresses it in this way:
  1. Be attentive.
  2. Be intelligent.
  3. Be reasonable.
  4. Be responsible.
  5. Be in love.
- It is clear that the covenant is concerned with the last of these. The basic human fear is that of intimacy. St. John of the Cross tells us that, as we come close to God, we discover that He is like night for the soul. The mystic is one who lets go of this fear and embraces the night, because that is where the Lover is.

III. The Doctrine of the Tree Ways

- Purgative
- Illuminative
• Unitive

iv. The Seventh Mansion

• The mystical path is a process of accepting love as we become more human and compassionate.

• St. Teresa of Ávila writes of rapture and ecstasy as states of consciousness in the lower mansions of the soul, but when she comes to the seventh and last mansion, she speaks almost exclusively about love of neighbor. This is where conversion leads: to love of others in the world.

• We live at a turning point in human history; we are in the throes of what Karl Jaspers called an axial age. A new global consciousness is emerging in the universe. The human family is being called to a change of heart and a revolution of consciousness. This revolution calls us to peace, engagement with the poor, dialogue with other religions, awareness of the role of women, and an immersion in the world and its needs.

• We struggle with this tug to the universe. Albert Einstein hit the nail on the head when he wrote, “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything except our way of thinking.”
**Review Questions**

1. Reflect on your covenant with God. How do you now understand it in new and deeper ways?

2. Pray for an hour at home or in church, and then volunteer for an hour at a soup kitchen or other outreach program. Reflect on the connection between the two activities.

3. As you walk through this day, try to remember to look at each person—even those you don’t know and those you don’t like—and see the presence of the divine in them.
Bibliography


