

21. EMBRACING MYSTERY



FOCUS:

Christian practice is being re-visioned, re-tooled, and re-claimed by those who are living the questions of their faith. They're attentive to ancient ways, comfortable with ambiguity, and open to the unknowable and indescribable mystery of the Divine.

MYSTERY

"We may find a certain security in believing that 'our' way is the only way. This is a natural part of any cultic religious experience. Far greater faith is required, however, to seek and trust that which you accept as infinite, beyond your comprehension, and subject to change. Today, this just may be the challenge of an educated and thinking Christian — to retain a faith "in face of the mystery."

— Gordon D. Kaufman,
Professor of Divinity Emeritus at Harvard Divinity School

Many seekers today are discovering ancient spiritual insights for the first time — not through blind faith and certitude, but through a commitment to openness and flexibility. Those who leave room for spiritual uncertainty discover what mystics have always known: that ambiguity is not something to be feared but recognized as an integral part of any spirituality that continues to develop and evolve. To acknowledge the wisdom of the unknowable. To celebrate the importance of the experiential. These are at the heart of the long-established spiritual practice re-emerging in our day: that of embracing mystery.

The idea of mystery itself refers to that which is unexplainable or beyond comprehension. Its Greek root implies the closing of eyes and lips, suggesting that which is beyond our ability to see or even comprehend. Antiquity is rife with "mystery cults" and other rites, the meaning of which was known only to the initiated. Even in the early Christian movement, there were carefully guarded teachings referred to as "the mysteries."

Rudolph Otto is just one in a long line of thinkers who have tried to categorize the non-rational reaction experienced by those who are "awestruck" or full of wonder. When he published *The Idea of the Holy*, he described the source of that indescribable and awe-inspiring sacredness with the Latin words "*numen*" and "*numinous*" (literally meaning divine power or spirit). Otto's intent was to offer vocabulary that suggests that "presence" which is just beyond our ability to grasp or describe. But his efforts to describe the indescribable come up against the same challenge of anyone trying to quantify or categorize mystery: that the truly holy is not something grasped in the intellectual realm, but firmly rooted in the experiential.

Ironically, while mystery has always been the source and core of what we call “religion,” those who fully embrace mystery are usually relegated to the fringes of religious systems. For the sake of institutional stability and corporate identity, right belief and certainty have been emphasized instead.

“Religion has always been about honoring mystery. [But] we have created people who’ve been afraid of ambiguity, mystery.”

–Fr. Richard Rohr lecture “The Edge of Christianity” September 13, 2007

People have been programmed to be suspicious of ambiguity and are, in fact, expected to adopt pre-determined belief systems – never mind the stifling spiritual effects it has on adherents.

“When you think about it, faith as belief is relatively impotent. You can believe all the right things and still be a jerk. And to soften that: you can believe all the right things and still be miserable, or still be in bondage, still be untransformed. So the emphasis upon belief is, I think, modern and mistaken. It’s also very divisive – once people start thinking that being a Christian is about believing the right things, then anybody’s list of what the right things are to believe becomes a kind of litmus test as to who’s really a good Christian and who’s not. And in my own work (and I think this is very ancient) I emphasize that being a Christian is really about one’s relationship with God. And that relationship with God can go along with many different belief systems.”

– Marcus Borg, in Living the Questions’, *Saving Jesus*

Whatever comes next for Christianity, it will have to teach people “how” to believe and live and not dwell simply on “what” to believe. Travelers with mystery will be grounded in the experiential that grows out of the seeker’s sense of inner authority. In the same way music, art, drama, and poetry defy any one interpretation, those who embrace mystery will bring to the table a variety of interpretations of the Divine. Concrete operational thinkers will find this line of pursuit maddeningly counter-productive, yet it is the disequilibrium created – the very indescribability of these insights – that give them their value. Poetry will often leave people open to mystery, each in their own way. The spirit fills in the rest.

MYSTICS AMONG US

*“I am being driven forward
Into an unknown land.
The pass grows steeper,
The air colder and sharper.
A wind from my unknown goal
Stirs the strings
Of expectation.*

*But still the question:
Shall I ever get there?
There where life resounds
A clear pure note
In the silence.”*

– Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*

He concealed it for over thirty years. The United Nations General-Secretary was a modern Mystic. Only after Dag Hammarskjöld was killed did it become widely known that his remarkable strength of will and passion for peace was driven by a closely guarded spiritual struggle and intense inner life. In his desk, friends discovered the manuscript of his journal and what was to become the spiritual classic, *Markings*.

Mystics can be found in every faith tradition – and no tradition at all. Christianity claims a number of the giants of mysticism over the centuries, including Mechtild of Magdeburg, Hildegard of Bingen, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Merton, and Howard Thurman. But regardless of faith traditions or even cultural circumstances, mystics endeavor to experience the Divine in as direct a manner as possible. One of the common characteristics of a mystic is one who transcends any cultic or superficial constraints in experiencing the Divine. They have no need of any “mediation” from priests, books, or other interpreters. For more and more people, long-held ideas and seemingly core values of faith have simply out-lived their usefulness. This tack resonates with a growing number of seekers convinced that the “more” is quite accessible, if only given a chance.

“Normal consciousness is a state of stupor, in which the sensibility to the wholly real and responsiveness to the stimuli of the spirit are reduced. The mystics...endeavor to awake from the drowsiness and apathy and to regain the state of wakefulness for their enchanted souls.”

– Abraham Heschel

For those who acknowledge a comfort with ambiguity and aspire to the state of wakefulness, Heschel suggests, one requirement is universal: the need to break one’s dependency on mediated, rote, and authoritarian religious experiences. Culver “Bill” Nelson has suggested a helpful starting place from which to begin the detox program: “The image of God as a person has to give way to the image of God as a presence.” This essentially mystical idea is naturally going to be a challenge to people and institutions not inclined toward mysticism – which is just one of the reasons why the church has seen mystics as a threat.

“The church has pretended to know more about the Ultimate Mystery than it does. Once again it has confronted people with premature answers when questions are both more appropriate and more inviting.”

– Jack Good, *The Dishonest Church* (page 182)

Be it hard questions, nuanced insight, comfort with ambiguity, or a hunger for a direct experience of the Divine, those who embrace mystery as a spiritual discipline all have one more conviction in common: there is much to be learned.

Whatever the mystery of the Divine is, the book is not closed. Another 20th century mystic, Quaker Rufus Jones, said it well in *Time* magazine in 1948:

"Vital religion cannot be maintained and preserved on the theory that God dealt with our human race only in the far past ages, and that the Bible is the only evidence we have that our God is a living, revealing, communicating God. If God ever spoke, [God] is still speaking ... [God] is the Great I Am, not a Great I Was . . ."

It requires a degree of unlearning of that which has come to be conventional wisdom. It entails honoring that which can be sensed but not described, felt but not quantified. That said, there can be no doubt that there are indeed mystics among us. When we embrace mystery, strive to emulate Jesus' deep experience of the Divine, and live at peace with the unknowable, we may be among them.

MYSTERIOUS WAYS

"I who am Divine am truly in you. I can never be sundered from you: However far we be parted, never can we be separated. I am in you and you are in Me. We could not be any closer. We two are fused into one, poured into a single mould. Thus, unwearied, we shall remain forever."

– Mechtild of Magdeburg, 13th century Rhineland Mystic

Maybe it's in a relationship that has been strained or alienated that a shimmer of reconciliation offers a sense of grace that can only be described as intoxicating. Perhaps it's in a beautiful sunset, a newborn baby, or being struck by some other facet of creation – Hildegard of Bingen wrote, "Creation reveals the hidden God just as clothes hint at the shape of a person's body..." And then there's music, art, and poetry – the artist's having captured a sliver of the Divine in imagery, on canvas, or in song.

While our culture tends to compartmentalize the sacred and the secular, reserving special places and times as "holy" and others as hopelessly secular, the Divine has a way of sneaking into peoples' consciousness at the most unexpected times. There is a Celtic saying that heaven and earth are only three feet apart – but in the "thin places" the distance becomes even smaller. A thin place is where the veil that separates the sacred from the pedestrian is so thin that one is able to catch a glimpse of the mystery beyond. A thin place is anywhere our hearts are more open to the "more" – when we feel the distance we often put between us and the Divine evaporating.

"The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw and knew I saw all things in God and God in all things."

– Mechtild of Magdeburg, 13th century Rhineland Mystic

Most people have had experiences where the artificial boundary between the secular and the sacred becomes very thin, indeed. In one of these thin places

there is an immediacy of experience where words alone become irrelevant. We feel like we are in the presence of something mysterious, of something Holy.

In many spiritualities, the simplest of life's necessities are lifted up and permeated with something... "more." For Christians, it involves even the most common of elements: bread, water, and wine. These everyday staples become the *sacra* (sacred) – the sacraments – the means of grace. Organized religion has always realized and taken advantage of how profoundly the Spirit can be at work in even the most mundane of circumstances.

And while there are those who seek to separate and isolate the sacred, there are others who have embraced the whole world and imbued it with Mystery. The Quakers and Franciscans are just two examples of worldviews striving to see all of life as sacred. Whether it is described as a spark of the Divine within each of us or a commitment to living all of life as a sacrament, their practices express the belief that all of life can be used by God – and who are we to declare some things holy or not holy?

EMBRACING MYSTERY

“The most beautiful and profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the sower of all true science. He (or she) to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.”

– Albert Einstein

In today's world of expanding universes, black holes, and multiple dimensions, it's hard to believe that we can know much of anything about anything. And while poverty, racism, war, injustice and countless other issues continue to pose daunting challenges to the human race, the lure of mystery continues to haunt people. The possibility of the “more” offers people hope for a depth and breadth of life, not just for themselves, but also for all of creation, aching to be whole. The hunger for the holy, what Hildegard of Bingen called “the yearning for good,” is a part of who we are. Our longing to be connected to Mystery connects us to one another and the hope for a world renewed.

In her manifesto on mystery, “The Summer Day,” poet Mary Oliver confesses that she doesn't know “exactly what prayer is,” but she does know “how to pay attention.” Could it be that simple? By living the questions – and simply paying attention – we open ourselves to a perspective on life that prepares us to embrace mystery.

Harrell Beck used to tell the story of the oldest living alumnus of the seminary returning to Boston for homecoming. Much to the students' chagrin, he was invited to speak at their weekly chapel. The day came and they draped him over the pulpit. He gazed out at the students and said, “I would like to thank my alma mater for setting me free without setting me adrift.” And he sat down.

Isn't that what it's all about? When mystery is embraced, freedom is embraced. Openness is embraced. The journey is embraced. Far from being cast adrift, those who embrace mystery are set on a lifelong path of discovery, growth, and gratitude for the wonder of it all.

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

DVD Chapter 2:

“So, what the hell can we know about anything?”

What are the certainties that make you a heretic?

DVD Chapter 3:

What are the implications of science and religion having gone in two different directions?

Nelson recounts Rabbi Heschel claiming that there's no distinction between the sacred and the secular. Explain.

What is the “one reality?”

Borg calls God “Mystery” with a capital “M.” How does this counter our inclination toward embracing “tight maps of reality?”

List some of the negative consequences of giving in to our tendency toward excessive certitude.

DVD Chapter 4:

How would acknowledging that “we dwell in Mystery” affect one’s day-to-day outlook on the world?

Why is embracing uncertainty a virtue?

List some of the ways bringing back the sense of Mystery can call us beyond our knowing into an exploration of the Holy.

DVD Chapter 5:

Describe some of the characteristics of Jesus the Mystic.

Carcaño speaks of her mystical experience in a Texas cotton field. How does this story inform your understanding of Mystery?

What does Scott mean when he says that Jesus used parables to “eliminate the sacred?”

How does the Cosmic Christ or Cosmic Wisdom lead to mysticism?

How does embracing cosmic mysticism affect our relationship with the environment?

SPIRITPRACTICE:
Discerning

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION:

Love Now Ascending

("Holy, Holy, Holy" – tune: Nicaea)

Lyrics by Jim Burklo*

Holy, holy, holy, love now ascending
Early in the morning our song shall rise to you.
Holy, holy, holy, joy that has no ending
Giving, forgiving, breathing life anew.

Holy, holy, holy, love without a limit
Care that binds creation in sacred unity,
Holy, holy, holy, birthing every minute,
Christ, Love's revealer, sets our spirits free.

Holy, holy, holy, infinite compassion,
Makes a place for every soul in God's eternal reign,
Holy, holy, holy, truth beyond religion,
Love that endures should nothing else remain.

Holy, holy, holy, raise your voice in singing,
Join the cosmic chorus in praise of Love divine,
Holy, holy, holy, God beyond all naming,
Echoes our song in harmony sublime.

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**Be sure to follow up on this session's theme with Session 21's *Living it Out*:
"Holy, Holy, Holy" distributed by your facilitator.**