

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
“Is Mysticism Compatible with Rational Religion??”
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Mysticism is a term with which UU’s tend to be uncomfortable. Indeed, many of my colleagues employ the word to describe someone who has abandoned reason for emotion, and ethical concerns for a more pietistic expression of faith, suggesting that the person ought to be decent about the whole matter and quietly leave the liberal religious movement with as little embarrassment as possible because we are a rational approach to religion.

Such an attitude reflects the fact that we’ve allowed a particular conception of mysticism to drive out all others: narrowing our definition to include only the view provided by traditional theology. This error is discussed by one philosopher who wrote, “To define mysticism in terms of any theological position –is to miss its very essence. For it is the emotional experience that is the core of mysticism—rather than the particular belief into which the emotion is projected. In the long history of religious yearnings, the mystics have been all kinds: theists and humanists, agnostics and believers, naturalists and super naturalists.”

This contention is supported by dictionary definitions: Random House, e.g. defines mysticism simply as “The immediate intuition of truths believed to transcend ordinary understanding...” and Webster’s similarly suggests that mystical is “having spiritual meaning, reality, or comparable value—that is neither apparent to the senses, nor obvious to our intelligence.”

Thus defined, mystical experience could include the emotional impact of watching a beautiful sunset, the significance of which is not to be found in a rational explanation of the effects of atmospheric particles on the sun’s rays.

That is not to suggest that it is irrational or unscientific, but any experience of breathtaking beauty (natural or artistic) can engender an awareness of value that is “neither apparent to the senses, nor obvious to intelligence.”

For example, someone has contended that even an inspiringly rendered violin concerto is simply “a pattern of sound waves—produced by rubbing the hairs of a dead horse across the intestines of a dead cat.” Obviously, there is something missing from such a description of aesthetic beauty.

By the same token, there is no scientific description that can explain the emotional dimensions of love relationship: the mystical moment of time-stopping inter-connectedness which two persons can experience. The ludicrousness of attempting such an explanation (illustrating the poet e.e. cummings’ reference to those who “given a scalpel, will dissect a kiss”) is revealed in this “chemical analysis of the effects of a kiss: “The adreno-sympathetic system calls on the liver for glycogen and energy. This, in turn, forces the release of insulin, Vitamin B-1, and phosphorous to burn the sugar. In the brain there is an exchange of starch and thiamine between the thalamic and cortical regions, and pulse and respiration rates rise....”

Well, I suppose that’s scientifically accurate, but it doesn’t quite cover all of the emotional dimensions of that kiss: the “WOW!” is missing! And, when we try to understand the “wow,” as we rational types are wont to do, we are driven to poetic language, for such experience is beyond prosaic expression.

Indeed, we speak of “the language of the heart,” which is itself a poetic term that designates NOT the organ which pumps our blood, but that part of our consciousness which is capable of mystical awareness. And at the core of that poetic consciousness is a realization of what one writer described as “the burning one-ness binding everything! a recognition of the underlying interconnectedness of all things.

There you have it: a summary statement which defines mysticism in a manner which, I think, is compatible with a rational approach to religion. It does not ask us to accept that which is contrary to reason, but simply to recognize that there are realms of experience which are beyond the grasp of intellectual understanding.

If you would read a description of that kind of mystical experience, I recommend a recent book by a neuroscientist, Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor. The book is entitled “My Stroke of Insight,” and it describes her experience of “oceanic oneness” when, after a stroke, the left side of her brain stopped functioning, making rational thought impossible. What she felt was that the atoms and molecules of her body were blended into all the energy around it. Gone were all the boundaries that separated her from the so-called outer world, as she seemed totally immersed in the dancing energy.

A similar expression of naturalistic mysticism was contained in our reading by the Indian poet, Tagore:

“The same stream of life that runs through my veins, night and day,
runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures. It is the same life that shoots in joy through
the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and
flowers... (and then he asks:)

Is it beyond thee to be glad with the gladness of this rhythm?

To be tossed and lost and broken in the whirl of this fearful joy?”

And that, my friends, is the crucial question for those of us who would maintain a rational approach to religion. It reveals what I think is the real issue confronting us: the issue of control. To let go and move with the flow of mystical awareness (the gladness of its rhythm) is to run the risk of being “tossed and lost and broken in the whirl of its fearful joy” and we don’t like the idea of, even momentarily, surrendering control of our lives.

But I would contend that such a naturalistic mysticism, scary as it may be, is not only compatible, it is essential to a rational approach to religion because:

- it is more open and alive and responsive to new experience;
- it is more encompassing and morally sensitive, and
- it is appropriately humble before the ultimate mystery of existence.

Let’s take a closer look at these three contentions:

The first was voiced many years ago by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the “patron saint” of our faith. He reacted to the excessive intellectualism of what he described as “the corpse cold Unitarianism” of 19th century Boston (which) was “squeezing every ounce of emotion and spirit out of life and promulgating, thereby, a picture as of man as pernicious as that painted by brushes dipped in the vats of original sin!” (that’s pretty pernicious!)

For the mystical, though ever rational, Emerson, to deny the realms of intuitive understanding—was to deprive our lives of vitality and warmth and depth of insight. In short, it is a juiceless, sterile and shallow faith that will not listen to “the promptings of the heart” For truth, Emerson argued, is not an intellectual puzzle to be solved but a complex, ambiguous, and sometimes inexplicable reality to be fully experienced emotionally, however dimly understood by the mind.

Regarding the contention that mystical awareness makes religion more encompassing and morally sensitive, I quote from Henry David Thoreau (certainly a social activist!) who once wrote, “The crucial aspect of mystical consciousness is in its intense realization of the meaningful patterns in the universe... (which) give the person a sense of the wonder, and the unity of the ultimate.” There again, we hear the common theme: an awareness of the unity, the “burning oneness binding everything.”

To put it in my own words, a mystical sense helps us to recognize that being religious is NOT a matter of looking at certain things with reverence, (especially on Sunday morning) but a reverential way of looking at

ALL things: a regard that is borne of an acute sensitivity to the sacred interconnectedness of everything: which sees things holistically: not as separate or isolated entities but always as parts of a larger whole.

And I would suggest that such an “I-Thou feeling” for other human beings (as Martin Buber termed it) rather than making people less ethical, affords us the only sound basis for morally responsible behavior. Because we feel this sense of oneness with all living things, we know that to harm anyone—is to injure ourselves. (As the poet put it, “Do not send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.”)

This is the point in the sermon when I usually ask the “So what?” question: why is any of this important? And the answer I came up with during this week of raucous Town Hall Meetings across our land —is that many of us are justifiably angry about the efforts of vested interests to destroy health care reform in our nation --with malicious misconceptions about what it would mean. And it is easy to work up a hatred for the shouters of those lies at those Meetings. But a sensitivity to the connectedness of all our lives—will enable us to see them as victims also, and maintain a more constructive attitude toward their misguided behavior. Recognizing that it is borne of fear, to resist it mightily, without resorting to hatred of our own. And I suggest that this is the more effective basis for social justice endeavor.

And, finally, a mystical awareness is essential to a healthy faith—because it engenders an appropriate humility before the ultimate mystery of existence.

That contention needs no elaboration, but I find it ironic that many rational religionists, who have based their beliefs on scientific evidence, are clinging to a stance which makes no room for mystery, while scientists, like Albert Einstein, were led by their work toward a naturalistic mysticism which recognizes that there are dimensions of reality which are beyond the grasp of science and reason, and before which (to use Einstein’s words) “we, with our simple powers, must humbly stand back.”

A healthy religious faith walks a narrow ridge between mindless mysticism on the one hand... and arrogant intellectualism on the other, recognizing that far from being outmoded superstition in an age of reason, the mystical sense is necessary to a full understanding of the deeper dimensions of human experience.

If we are to deal effectively with the mountain-high, ocean-deep, and universe-wide questions of life, we rational religionists must retain a mystical awareness of reality.