

The Mystical Path

Pilgrimage To The One Who Is Always Here

Daniel A. Seeger



Quaker Universalist Fellowship



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An Incomplete List Of Mystic Sages Beginning With Christianity's Apostolic Age

Christian Tradition:

Paul of Tarsus
 Clement of Alexandria (c. 160 - 220)
 Origen (c. 183 - 253)
 Augustine (354 - 430)
 Dionysis the Areopagite (c. 475 - 525)
 Gregory the Great (540 - 604)

Symeon the New Theologian (949 - 1022)
 Anselm (1033 - 1109)
 Bernard of Clairvaux (1091 - 1153)
 Hildegard of Bingen (1098 - 1179)
 Mechtild of Magdeburg (1212 - 1299)
 Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)
 Bonaventure (1221 - 1274)
 Thomas Aquinas (1226 - 1274)
 Dante Alighieri (1265 - 1321)
 Meister Eckhart (1260 - 1327)
 Author of Theologia Germanica (c. 1350)
 John Ruysbroeck (1293 - 1381)
 Thomas a Kempis (1380 - 1471)
 Author of The Cloud of Unknowing (c. 1396)
 Catherine of Siena (1347 - 1380)
 Joan of Arc (1412 - 1431)
 Ignatius Loyola (1491 - 1556)
 John of the Cross (1542 - 1591)
 Rose of Lima (1586 - 1617)
 Jacob Boehme (1575 - 1624)
 Brother Lawrence (1605 - 1691)
 Angelus Silesius (1624 - 1677)
 George Fox (1624 - 1690)
 William Law (1686 - 1761)
 William Blake (1757-1827)

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881 -1955)

Thomas Merton (1915 - 1968)
 Mother Theresa (1910 -1997)

World Traditions:

Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C - A.D. 40)
 Marcus Aurelius (121 - 180)
 Plotinus (205 - 270)

Mohammed (570 - 632)
 Sankara (c. 700 - 750)
 Rabi'a (717 - 810)

Al Ghazzali (1058 - 1111)

Jalalu'd Din Rumi (1207 - 1273)

Kabir (1440 - 1518)

Basho (1644 - 1694)
 Ba'al Shem Tov (1700 -1760)
 Ryokan (1758 - 1831)
 Ramakrishna (1836 - 1886)
 Rabindranath Tagore (1861 - 1941)
 Mohandas Gandhi (1869 - 1948)
 Martin Buber (1882 - 1965)
 Krishnamurti (1895 - 1986)
 Dag Hammarskjöld (1905 - 1961)
 Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907 - 1972)
 Simone Weil (1909 - 1943)

The list of Christian mystical sages is derived from Evelyn Underhill's classic work *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, first published in 1911. The last three names on the list have been added by Daniel A. Seeger.

The list of mystical sages from world traditions has been assembled by Daniel A. Seeger.

is to let our lives pour out teaching like prophecy; so to live is to help make this world a place worthy of all people, so to live is to prepare a place where future generations can make their home.

Editor's Introduction

Daniel Seeger needs no introduction to members of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship. He has written four of our pamphlets, and they remain among the most popular of our publications. They include: *The Place of Universalism in the Religious Society of Friends or Is Coexistence Possible?* (1986); *Quaker Universalists: Their Ministry Among Friends and in the World* (1988); *The Boundaries of Our Faith* (1991); and *I Have Called You Friends: One Quaker's Reflections Concerning Jesus* (1997).

Dan spent many years on the staff of the American Friends Service Committee. More recently, he has served as director of the Quaker Center for Study and Contemplation at Pendle Hill. We were delighted when, after his retirement, he agreed to clerk the steering committee of QUF. He has continued to perform the duties of clerk despite being called out of retirement in 2004 by the AFSC for an interim assignment on the West Coast.

The essay presented here was prepared as a lecture for a forum conducted by the Medford Leas retirement center at Medford, New Jersey. It was given in November, 2002.

Rhoda R. Gilman

When a peaceful silence lay over all, and night had run the half of her swift course, down from the heavens, down from the royal throne, leaped your all-powerful Word; into the heart of a doomed land the stern warrior leaped.

Wisdom 18:14-15, Jerusalem Bible

Then Yahweh put out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me: "There, I am putting my words into your mouth."

Jeremiah 1:9-10, Jerusalem Bible

Know that the kingdom of God is near.

Luke 21:31, Jerusalem Bible

Asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was to come, he gave them this answer, "The coming of the kingdom of God does not admit of observation and there will be no one to say, 'Look here! Look there!' For, you must know, the kingdom of God is among you."

Luke 17:20-21, Jerusalem Bible

I shall not call you servants any more, because a servant does not know his master's business; I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father.

John 15:15, Jerusalem Bible

establish an inner peace, an inner harmony, which will allow us authentically to contribute to the establishment of an outer peace and outer harmony in the world at large.

Who shall stay the human heart, asks Saint Augustine, that it may stand in stillness and see how eternity, ever motionless, neither of the past nor of the future, nevertheless utters time past and time to come?

We are told that in the beginning there was but one Word, a word which is the mother of all things, a word of grace and truth. This Word abides within each and every one of us, and within every human being ever called to life. Existing in the beginning before all other things were made, this primordial saving Word was uttered out of silence, and to silence we must return if we hope to hear it again. When all voices, sounds, agitations, and mental debates are put away, and a pure stillness and peace and reconciliation are present, then God speaks to us. To enter such silence is to let go of everything, even of every wish and desire, for as we are told, "the Truth awaits eyes unclouded by longing." Out of this inner silence our hearts are touched by something deeper than all our reasonings, something more comprehensive than all contradictions, something that can support all problems without the need for humanly devised solutions. We discover that one moment of true listening will yield what no amount of grappling can wrestle from life. When we drop our questions, paradoxically we find the answers, almost as if the answers had been waiting for us to discover them but had been drowned out by the noise of our questions. Out of such silence leaps the all powerful word of God and we find ourselves seized with meaning.

The more profound possibilities of our human nature become visible to us, enabling us gradually to grow into what we know we are meant to be. And in the same measure that we come alive to our own possibilities, we become alive and alert as well to the needs and to the possibilities of others. Thus we discover a way of life worthy of our profoundest enthusiasm, and by living it fully and faithfully we, in fact, do not labor for ourselves alone. For so to live

making of bread does not compare with actually tasting the bread, so is there also a difference between thinking theological thoughts and actually experiencing the divine presence. Indeed, our thoughts about God are at the very best misleading and at worst a form of idolatry, a worship of our own notions.

Inner silence, in addition to its quality of listening, is also characterized by presence. To be inwardly silent is to bring ourselves wholly into the present moment; it is to bring our spirits right to where our bodies are by stopping the circling thoughts and inner conversations which take our minds elsewhere. Our spirits have a habit of wandering around in times past or times future that do not belong to us, while holding in absent-minded regard the only time that does belong to us — the present. We are in danger of never really living, but of only thinking about living, or hoping to live. One who practices inner silence has the quality of being thoroughly present here and now. If the divine presence is going to manifest, it will do so now in the present moment, not yesterday or tomorrow, and we are apt to miss the still, small voice if our minds are endlessly chattering about the past and the future.

Only by being present and mentally silent can we see the truth of the situations we are in, undistorted by our own personal agitations and needs, and can thus know what response is called for from us in truth. Without such mindfulness, our ability to respond precisely and compassionately in everyday affairs is crippled.

Inner silence, calming the agitations of our hearts and minds, letting go of all that is stubborn and grasping, is essentially an expression of the love of truth. To be dispassionate, not to let one's own needs or prejudices or emotions color one's actions, is essentially to put truth before everything else. To love truth in this way is to love God, who is Truth. Thus the practice of inner silence is the same as the love of God. To practice it successfully, if we can, means that we can participate in political and social life without demanding anything for ourselves, without there being any narrowness or pettiness of soul to poison our work. It is to

From the Gospel According to Saint John 1:12,13

But to all who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to all who believe in the name of him who was born not out of human stock or urge of the flesh or will of man but of God himself.

Jerusalem Bible,
1966

But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who were born not from human stock or human will but from God himself.

New Jerusalem
Bible, 1990

But to all who did receive him, to those who have yielded him their allegiance, he gave the right to become children of God, not born of any human stock, or by the fleshly desire of a human father, but the offspring of God himself.

New English Bible,
1970

The Mystical Path

A Pilgrimage To The One Who Is Always Here

Animating the entire creation is something which is eternal — something to which people in different ages and different cultures have given a thousand names. Elusive, yet within our grasp; mysterious, yet knowable; remote, yet intimate; this great creative presence is that out of which everything comes, that from which everything derives its vitality. It is that in which everything finds its rest, and that to which everything will return. Just as the mighty wind, though moving everywhere, has no resting place but space, so all creatures and all things have no home but in God.

God's gracious creative presence is within us and around us and seeking to make Itself known to us. This is an awesome miracle seen again and again in human experience.

Yet this divine presence is also beyond the power of our words to describe, and beyond the capacity of our minds to understand. While it is natural that we seek to use the powers of thought and of speech to communicate our awareness of this fundamental reality, we need constantly to be alert to the dangers of being misled by conventional notions and mental cliches, constantly aware of the risks of trying to domesticate God with the limitations of human words and concepts, constantly aware that with a lack of respect for mystery we deprave ourselves. In general, the deeper the experience one has of God, the less one is able to say about it.

As human beings we know ourselves to be imperfect and incomplete. Yet the Creator, while leaving us incomplete, also endowed us with a capacity to finish the work of fashioning our

But their secret does not involve abandoning themselves to busy-ness and neglecting the spiritual source of all authentic ministry. They are not like some contemporary do-gooders who haul themselves relentlessly from one worthy committee or beneficent project to another in an endless, sometimes desperate round of super-activity. A contemporary journalist, truly amazed, once asked Mother Theresa how she ever managed to find the time to accomplish so much. Mother Theresa's answer was simple: "I pray for six hours every day."

I would like to close by reflecting on how the practice of silence is essential to serious spiritual seeking. God can come to us in many ways. But spiritual sages of both the East and the West agree universally that God's first language is silence, and the practice of silence is common in monasteries and ashrams the world over. It is important to acknowledge the significance of silence and to understand how the practice of silence draws together everything we have said so far.

First, it should be made clear that when masters of the spiritual life speak of silence, they are not necessarily talking about an external hush in the physical realm. They are speaking of an inner silence, a silence of the heart and of the mind — an inner silence which can actually be maintained in the midst of physical noise, if necessary.

This inner silence consists of a gentle releasing, a letting go, of mental movies, of preoccupation with the events of yesterday, of plans for the next steps to take on the important project at work, of all inward thoughts and desires, cravings and dislikes, circling thoughts, and inner conversations. By releasing such transient concerns we begin to make a space within ourselves where universal and eternal things can be heard. Inner silence has the quality of alert listening. Thus, through inner silence we become poor in spirit, and being poor in spirit brings us closer to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Even the thinking of theological thoughts is laid aside during the practice of inner silence. For just as reading a recipe for the

love my friend but myself. I ought to love my friend for his own goodness and for his own virtue and for everything that he is in himself . . . This is exactly the way it is with people who are in God's love and who do not seek their own interest either in God or in themselves or in things of any kind. . . . Some people want to love God in the same way as they love a cow. You love it for the milk and the cheese and for your own profit. So do all people who love God for the sake of outward riches or inner consolation. But they do not love God correctly, for they merely love their own advantage.

Many people have the mistaken idea that mystics are invariably recluses. This is a great misconception. While there is a tradition of desert spirituality and of anchorites, most mystically inclined people are very active in the world. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, founded and administered 300 monasteries, monasteries which reformed the agriculture and the economy of Europe. He was counselor to five Popes, wrote and traveled extensively, and organized the Fourth Crusade. Joan of Arc, as we know, led an army in a battle that was a turning point in the Hundred Years War.

If we review a list of persons whose spirituality is characterized by mysticism, both in the Christian tradition and in other traditions, we find that relatively few of them led lives of seclusion. Mystics are often pioneers in human endeavor — discoverers, religious or social reformers, artists, national heroes. The victories they gain over circumstances reveal something of the super-normal vitality of which they partake. Sharply intuitive and painfully practical persons, mystics are often in closer, more intimate and more bracing contact with the realities which surround them than are other people. They are both highly qualified and purely motivated to render services of practical compassion to their fellow creatures.

own nature. The Creator gave us the freedom to do so as well — the freedom to do so for better or for worse. We long for completeness, and with our efforts to achieve it we arrive at our most noble accomplishments and also suffer our most crushing defeats. We live surrounded by idols, idols which constantly bombard us with false images of completeness. Accumulating money and exerting power over others are two avenues through which people are tempted to fill the void of their incompleteness, two avenues through which they seek to fulfill themselves.

I am told that the average American child who watches an average amount of television sees depicted more than 3,000 murders by the time he or she is twelve years old! From everywhere, it seems, we are assailed with the notion that our nature is innately violent, that our chief preoccupation is with our sexuality, and that our main purpose in life lies in the acquisition of ever more nifty possessions. Unless a vision for our completeness is inspired by the balance, order, harmony and peace which is the natural destiny of the creation, unless the all-powerful word of God leaps to us out of the silence, we shall indeed continue to live in the doomed land of which the scriptures speak.¹

As there is given to us some degree of awareness of the ineffable mystery of God we are shown the way to complete ourselves, both as individuals and as communities, in accordance with the principles of compassion and truth which are the basis of our natural and intended character. We become more exactly who we are meant to be, and we are filled with joy and with a power to

¹ *When a peaceful silence lay over all,
and night had run the half of her swift course,
down from the heavens, down from the royal throne, leaped
your all-powerful Word;
into the heart of a doomed land the stern warrior leaped.*

act usefully which partakes of divine creativity itself. And just as we perceive that a beautiful thing in some mysterious way expresses and contains all beauty, and a good gesture, no matter how small, somehow contains and expresses all goodness, we also see that the fully realized human being — the perfect human being — expresses true godliness in a pure, perfect and complete way. Thus, the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth offer a perfected image of the divine life operating under human conditions.

The historic life of Jesus is paradigmatic of all spiritual journeys. All such journeys begin with an obscure and humble birth deep in the mysterious recesses of the soul. There is an education in poverty and simplicity; there are inevitable temptations, mortifications and solitudes; there is self-giving in a life of service and practical compassion; there are “dark nights” of profound forsakenness; there is the painful crucifixion of the self; and there is ultimately a final reabsorption into the source of all.

God sends his word in the person of Jesus Christ to announce just one thing. That thing is: “Wake up!” This theme of waking up, of getting up, of rising up, may well signify the meaning of spirituality the world over. Spirituality is our waking up — in our consciousness, in our working lives, in our whole way of living — waking up to the divine presence everywhere.

God is equally near to all creatures. God has a net, a hunter’s ploy, spread out over all creation. We can penetrate this net filled with creatures and with things and recognize that God is everywhere. The person who knows God most truly is the person who can find the divine presence equally in all things. It is good that a person has a peaceful life; it is better that a person bear a trouble-filled life with patience. But best of all is that a person can be at peace even in the midst of trouble. For God is equally in all things and all places and is available in the same way and to the same degree in every circumstance. God speaks to us in and through even our most troubling predicaments. By listening deeply to the message of any given moment we can discern what we are

become aware and to embody a goodness for which we thirst and to which we can resonate in our way of living.

He went on to observe that religious movements have in common the understanding that to achieve knowledge of God and to perceive accurately how to live in a way consistent with the Creator’s goodness requires that we rid ourselves of self-centeredness. According to Toynbee, the curse of self-centeredness takes many forms, as do the strategies of various religions for struggling against it. Among these strategies are the idea of gaining our life by losing it, the metaphor of the crucifixion; various Eastern religious disciplines for practicing emptiness or mindfulness; the use of mantras or the Jesus prayer; the practices of inner silence, the tonsure, uniform garb, and celibacy; the abandonment of personal given names associated with the ego structure for religious names associated with desired spiritual virtues; and the discipline of living in religious communities. All of these are insights and practices through which religious traditions have sought to overcome what Thomas Merton describes as the “rigidity and harshness and coarseness of our ingrained egoism,” an egoism which he further describes as “the one insuperable obstacle to the infused light and action of the Spirit of God.”

There is an irony here. The ego can turn everything to its own purposes, even spirituality. People can pursue the spiritual path because they desire peace and consolation. A kind of spiritual gluttony can take place where people become much preoccupied with achieving inner bliss. Seeking personal and placid satisfactions, they have no intention of being drawn into a life of great and self-giving service. Spiritual sages like Saint John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart address this problem of the spiritual life quite directly. Let me quote Meister Eckhart:

Whoever dwells in the goodness of God’s nature dwells in God’s love. Love, however, has no why. If I had a friend and I loved him because of all the good I wished to come to myself through him, I would not

mystical moment they were more truly present and more truly themselves than at any other time. So the first paradox of the peak experience is that when the person was carried away they were more truly present, and when they lost themselves, they were more truly who they were meant to be. This first paradox offers a glimmering of why practitioners of mystical spirituality choose a life of detachment, of letting go.

Second, people who have had a peak experience of the sort we are examining are usually alone, but not lonely. In the peak experience their heart expands and embraces everything around them, great and small, every pebble on the shore and every star in the sky. Things near and far, past and future, all find their place in a great embrace of the moment in which the seeker is one with all. This is the second paradox. When the person is truly alone, they are also at one with all. This is the root experience from which a life of celibacy grows.

The third paradox which inheres in these spiritual peak experiences is that everything suddenly makes sense. One's heart is touched, and there is peace, even though all one's problems remain unsolved and all one's questions remain unanswered. Somehow, deep spirituality touches something more profound than our questions, something more comprehensive than all contradictions, something that can support all problems without the need of solutions. The experience is that one moment of true looking and listening yields what no amount of grappling with problems can wrestle from life. This is the insight from which the ascetic discipline of obedience grows.

Arnold Toynbee, the great historian who saw humankind's spiritual quest as the driving force behind the march of civilizations and eras, observed that at the root of all faiths is a belief that there exists at the foundation of reality a mysterious presence, supreme being, creative agency, deity, or principle of lawfulness. Although beyond our human capacity fully to understand or grasp, it is nevertheless close enough to express a truth of which we can

meant to do, how we are meant to respond. We listen with our hearts. Obedience in its full sense is attuning the heart to God's simple call which is always contained in the complexity of any given situation. Just as the eye perceives light and the ear sound, the heart is the organ for sensing meaning and purpose.

Thus our waking up and our getting up is also an opening up. When we are opened up we are ready to accept and to receive. Spirituality thus becomes the art of wakefulness, of being aware, conscious and alive. Awe, astonishment and praise are the fruits of our wakefulness, our resurrection from dead consciousness. All we can say for this gift of a divine universe, divinely infused and divinely present, is thank you. Thus it is not happiness that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us happy.

* * * *

The title indicates that this essay is about "mysticism," but I have not yet used the word. Not many of those whom we designate as mystics actually use the word themselves. They may be people drawn to a devout and holy life, they may be alive to the presence of God, and they may be inspired to give some testimony or carry out some mission based upon their experience of a divine leading. But people rarely set out to be mystics, nor do they announce themselves to be mystics when trying to explain themselves. Typically what happens is that theologians, philosophers, and analysts categorize a certain type of religious experience as mystical in order to generalize about it for academic purposes.

What I have offered in the opening paragraphs is an expression of how reality might be understood and experienced by a person within Christian spiritual culture who sees things in the way we term mystical. I know that not all Friends are Christians, and my introduction may seem overly sectarian or parochial, but the fact is that most of what we term mystical spirituality occurs within the context of a distinct religious culture, and to try to offer an example stripped of its own spiritual

vocabulary would be misleading and false. Since I assume most readers are familiar with Christianity, this seemed to me an appropriate place to begin.

But the first thing I want to emphasize, now that we are proceeding to the analytic or academic part of our consideration, is that experiences and perspectives we term mystical are universal and are manifested in all spiritual cultures and even sometimes among secularized people. There is Jewish mysticism, Christian mysticism, Buddhist mysticism, Islamic mysticism, Vedic mysticism, Taoist mysticism, and mysticism and shamanism practiced among the many spiritual cultures of indigenous peoples.

But what, exactly, is mysticism? Although I said earlier that it is a word used mainly for analytic or academic purposes, it does not follow, unfortunately, that there is a pristine clarity about the term. *Mysticism is an affirmation that union, communication, and even intimacy between the human creature and the deity is known in experience to occur.* Yet how does this differ from religion or spirituality in general? After all, prayer, worship and sacraments such as the eucharist are all affirmations that connectedness and communication between people and God are possible. What, then, makes something we call mysticism different from religion in general? Indeed, some commentators say that mysticism is nothing else but the fundamental essence of religion, its vital heart and center.

This definitional difficulty does indeed point to another dimension of universality in the mystical idea. I said earlier that mysticism occurs in all spiritual cultures. That is one dimension of its universality. I will now point to another dimension. I will daringly affirm that every human being is a mystic to some extent. A mystic is not a special kind of human being; rather, every human being is his or her own special kind of mystic. Referring once again to the Christian way of putting it, it is true, as the Gospel of John affirms, that there is a light which enlightens every human being ever called to life, and this light within us, if we attend to it and accept it, transforms us into the offspring of God.

combination of incomparably high emotion with total union. But their use of sexual imagery is not so much the problem as are other attempts to describe the experience, attempts which seem to obliterate the distinction between God and the mystic, where the mystic and God seem to become one.

When some Christian people of a mystical bent say things like “God became man so that men could become God,” or “The knower and the known are one. God and I, we are one in knowledge. There is no distinction between us,” other Christian people can begin to feel acutely uncomfortable. Some of the language used by mystics to describe the union with God that they experience can sound like blasphemy or self-idolatry to people who have not had the experience. In a cautious moment a mystic will say something like, “The soul is like a mirror and God is like the sun. Even though one can see the sun perfectly through the mirror, one never confuses the mirror with the sun itself.” In a less cautious moment a mystic can say things like: “A good man is the only begotten Son of God.”

Needless to say, the spirituality of mystics varies considerably, and academicians and theologians have deployed an array of analytic tools for discussing these differences. We cannot go into this, even in a sketchy way. But I would like to explore further some common elements of mystical experiences as these are expressed in modern language by a contemporary practitioner of the art of contemplative living, Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk. I am going to summarize his thoughts, rather than quote him word for word.

People who have spiritual peak experiences, or mystical experiences, usually come away from them noting three paradoxes which characterize them.

First, one is usually impelled to say something like “I was carried away,” or “I was swept off my feet.” “I lost myself watching that child trying to catch a minnow in a tidepool.” Losing oneself and being carried away are quite appropriate expression for what happened. Yet people also emerge with the feeling that in the

civilization, a religious tradition can enable populations of countless millions of people to relate to each other so that life flows along in predictable and natural-seeming patterns which almost everyone can regard as appropriate and good. There is a very legitimate conservative spirit in religious life.

At the same time, there is also a revolutionary or prophetic dimension to the religious life. This prophetic function is most conspicuous in times of transition, when the old order is disintegrating and being replaced by something new. Conditions slowly but inexorably change, new information and insight is gained, and the inevitable lapses and shortcomings of governmental, social, and religious institutions come into view. The religious sensibility must somehow stand outside of cultural and social arrangements, even while upholding them, proposing constantly an enlargement of the sustaining vision and a greater perfection in the expression it is given in institutions and practices.

Even in stable times, when the need for change may not be pressing, the legitimate conserving function of religion can grow formal and mechanical. The wellspring of enthusiasm and of joy can disappear. Semiautomatic performance of religious duties can come to lack any throb of personal experience.

The mystical dimension of religious life thus performs both a revitalizing role and a prophetic role, but individual mystics can get caught in the tension between the conservative and prophetic aspects of religious life. Both are legitimate, but they are often contradictory. Therefore many mystics, but by no means all, have had narrow brushes with the Holy Inquisition and other religious authorities in carrying out their ministry.

The last cause of friction between mystics and the religious mainstream is a little more difficult to explain. A mystical experience of union with the divine, an ecstatic sense of connectedness with the transcendent, can, obviously, be overwhelming. It is an experience that defies human language. Mystics have often resorted to sexual imagery to describe the

There are probably very few people who, at some moment or other, have not had a glimmering of this — have not felt themselves to be deeply and personally connected to some transcendent reality. It may be a passing or fleeting sensation, and one might not act upon it in any way. A person might not even remember it, or may dismiss it as just a feeling or emotion with no objective reality, but I believe almost everyone experiences it.

So, in the face of some confusion among learned people about defining and delineating mysticism as an idea, I am going to offer a layperson's view. When we identify people as mystics, what distinguishes them from other members of their respective faith communities has to do with a matter of degree. It is a matter of the degree to which they experience, and the emphasis to which they give, certain aspects of spiritual life that are actually universal.

Whereas some people may experience a profound connectedness with the divine at special moments, perhaps when seeing a sunset or a baby's smile, and then slip back into a more humdrum mode of existence, a mystic is sensitive to the miraculousness of ordinary things and lives with an awareness of God constantly. Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, a 17th-century mystic, perceived the pots and pans he had to clean every day in the monastery kitchen as indistinguishable from the sacred vessels of the altar. Whereas most people accept the coming and going, as if at random, of peak spiritual experiences, mystics take some trouble to prepare themselves to receive the gift of divine grace through spiritual disciplines and ascetic practices. Whereas most people are content to try to communicate with God through the prosaic mechanism of human speech and thought processes, mystics explore ways to transcend the limitations of human communication. They explore ways to experience God on God's own terms, if you will.

Finally, and perhaps most important, many people of faith presume that God's self-disclosure occurred in a remote and heroic time in the past, and that God, although present, has lapsed into

silence, leaving us to fend with ancient texts containing the divine message, perhaps accompanied by relatively vague, weak and rare glimmerings of the divine presence in modern times. Mystics are audacious enough to testify that this is not so, that God speaks to us today just as he did to the ancients. Moreover, mystics are apt to insist that even if Jesus were born a thousand times in Galilee it would all be in vain unless he were born again in each and every one of us today.

Mystics are not necessarily people who hear voices and see visions. Some do, as we know. Joan of Arc heard the voices of Saint Catherine, Saint Michael and Saint Margaret. Paul, on the road to Damascus, experienced a light that blinded him for three days and that announced itself to be Jesus. But most mystics do not speak of such miraculous experiences. They are more apt to focus on the miracle of ordinary things just as they are.

It is necessary to explain at this point that, even though I have pointed to the universality of mysticism in religious experience, nevertheless the idea of mysticism is often not well-received in the mainstream religious community. When people with strong mystical tendencies appear, the religious community often does not quite know what to do with them. Joan of Arc was burned at the stake, as we know. This is a very extreme example of the matter. However, many mystics experienced very vexed relationships with religious authorities. There are several quite understandable reasons for this.

First, there are various fringe phenomena which bear resemblances to mysticism, and indeed to which mystical practices sometimes lead. Mysticism can shade off into the occult, into forms of magic, and into manifestations of hysteria. Various pathological states of mind can pass themselves off as religious openings. Genuine mystics are sometimes somewhat eccentric, while merely eccentric and even demented people often claim to have spiritual visions. Discerning healthy from unhealthy forms of mysticism can be a genuine nuisance to religious authorities. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that, just as we do not abandon love

just because some manifestations of love are pathological, neither should we abandon mysticism simply because some examples of it go off the deep end.

Second, there is an inherent conflict between people who regard themselves to be authorities charged with a responsibility for nurturing the institutions of religion, and people who show up claiming they have their own direct communication from God, thereby circumventing the established religious order while perhaps also suggesting that things should be done in a new or different way. Not all mystics are in an avant garde; some are extraordinarily orthodox. Mother Theresa, for example, a person of our own times who was an exemplar of a profoundly mystical spirituality, always disappointed the mass media, who were prone to lionize her, because of her utterly orthodox and non-revolutionary attitudes on issues like the ordination of women or abortion. But mysticism tends to flourish at times of trouble and transition, when people are looking for a new way forward, and mystics, out of their spiritual visions and ecstasies, are often apt to challenge the business-as-usual of religious authorities.

Thirdly, and closely related to this second point, is the matter of two contradictory tendencies in religious life which often result in mystics being held at arms length by the religious mainstream. There is a tendency, on the one hand, to regard religion as something permanent and unchanging. On the other hand is the need to reshape and reinvigorate religion through fresh and spontaneous experiences. No religion could survive in the evolving world if it did not change and adapt; yet no religion can minister to our deepest needs if it does not reveal some permanent and time-transcending realities.

Habit, custom and system are the ways we preserve the gains of the race. Stability keeps the future organic with the past. One of the main functions of religion is to preserve, to teach, and to ensure the continued availability of the gathered wisdom of a culture. Often succeeding in orienting and defining an entire