

Spirituality, Mysticism and the Christianity?

Aaron Dunlop

There is some confusion between these terms mysticism and spirituality. Both terms trace their origin back to the seventeenth century France, when they were interchangeable (McGrath, 5). Over time they have become quite fluid in their usage and difficult to pin down. They are like moving targets. While there may be overlap in the general use of the terms "mysticism" and "spirituality" in modern times, they're not identical. All mysticism is a kind of spirituality, but not all spirituality is mystical.

The word "mysticism" comes from the root verb "muo" in Greek (μύω) and means "to close" or "to shut." This term refers to the path toward direct communion with deity, the universe or ultimate

reality. In the mystical encounter, the individual goes beyond intellectual ability, into the mysterious unknown. The mystical encounter is ineffable or inexpressible—an experience whereby one must close the mouth and keep quiet (Thompson, x; Perrin, 240-241).

The term mysticism may also refer to a school of spirituality within a variety of religious groups, like Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, or Kabbalah and Hasidism in Judaism, or in the Hinduism practices of dharma and yoga. In Buddhism also, there are strands of mysticism known as Zen koans, Vajrayana visualizations and Dzogchen.

Within Christianity, mysticism is more associated with Roman Catholicism, but there have been Protestant mystics to varying degrees of extremes, including George Fox (1624-1691), founder of the Quakers who promoted a direct experience of the “Inner Light.” Madame Guyon (1648-1717) also, who promoted a “quietist” spirituality, had an impact on Protestant mystics, although she was from a Catholic background.

Strands of mysticism can be identified also in African Traditional Religions (ATR). These are often experienced through trances, drumming, dancing,

divination and initiation rites. A tradition of specialists and professionals has developed to help individuals and communities communicate with the spirit world, including shamans, witchdoctors, prophets, priests and medicine men and women.

These African spiritualities have had a profound and pervasive influence on African tradition and culture and many scholars and missionaries have ignored their role in African Christian thought. The result is, as one African author has said, *"a shallow Christian theology that does not adequately address the issues of spiritual and mystical powers and forces"* (Turaki, 201).

In the modern use of the terms then, spirituality is a true Christian and biblical pursuit. It is the response of the human heart to the indwelling Holy Spirit. Mysticism on the other hand is not compatible with true Christianity, because it pursues an experience with God without the mediation of Jesus Christ, it is not anchored in the Word of God and it is not inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity.

Sources

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