

Interreligious Insight

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One Mysticism - Many Voices

Paul F. Knitter

Mysticism helps us understand “religion” in both its singular and its plural forms. To see and feel the relationship between “religion” and “mysticism” enables one to understand, more clearly and more engagingly, both one’s own religious identity and that of others. Perhaps we can say: to be deeply religious is to be broadly religious. The more I enter into the mystical source of my own religion, the more I will appreciate the source of your religion. Let me try to explain further.

To be deeply religious = to be broadly religious

I think we can say that to be deeply religious – that is, to be truly, authentically, actually religious – is to be a mystic. To be a religious person is to be a mystical person, for mystics are people who have religious experiences. Mystics not only belong to a religious tradition; they enter into the personal, transformative experiences that gave origin to those traditions and that keep those traditions alive. Mystics are people who have made the experience of Jesus or Buddha or Lao Tzu their own. What they believe is not something they hear or read, but something they feel. You might say that mystics are religiously adults: they have grown up in their religious beliefs; they believe not because others have told them so but because their own experience tells them so. The difference between being deeply religious and just religious, or between being an adult and a juvenile religious person, is explained, in more technical terms, by Frithjof Schuon, the mystical scholar of Islam. Within all the religions of the world, Schuon identifies what he calls exoteric and esoteric believers. The exoterics are religious people for whom the externals of religion count most – beliefs, rituals, practices. To be religious, for exoteric believers, is primarily a matter of professing creeds, or performing rituals, or observing laws. These creeds are taken literally – Allah actually spoke to Muhammad, Jesus literally went up to heaven – and the rituals or laws are taken absolutely: you have to do it exactly this way. Moreover, exoteric believers tend to view their own religion as the only, or at least the best, way of being religious and following God’s will.

Please note that, for Schuon, exoteric believers are true believers; they are in touch with the Divine, but this touch is only, as it were, “skin-deep,” not “heart-felt.” Further, Schuon in no way minimizes the essential importance of the externals of religion – its creeds and codes and ceremonies.

But what Schuon calls esoteric believers – what I am calling mystics – these realize that the externals, as essential as they are, are always a means to an end, never the end itself. That end is a personal, transformative, unitive experience of the Divine – one’s own

experience of the Divine, an experience mediated through the community and its externals, but ultimately one's own. And as the mystic or esoteric believer grows more deeply into this experience, she realizes that although her connectedness with the Divine is triggered or expressed by the externals of religion, it is always much more than these externals and can never be captured or contained by these externals. Mystics, therefore, take their religious beliefs and practices very seriously, but not literally or absolutely.¹ To be an esoteric believer, to be a mystic, is to be an adult, a deeply believing religious person. My teacher, Karl Rahner, agreed with this. But he also added something very sobering and very true. Speaking to his own religious community, Rahner used to say that in the future, unless Christians are mystics they will not survive – or, Christianity will not survive.² Given the modern and the postmodern criticisms of religion, given the way exoteric religion is being abused today as a means of manipulating people either to submit blindly or to go rashly to war, unless Christians have deeply entered into the mystical experience of Christ and the Spirit, they will have neither the strength nor the inner freedom to continue with their church, or with religion at all.

But what are we talking about when we speak of the mystical experience? Certainly, every religious tradition, will offer different descriptions of the experience at the heart of each religion. But in surveying the mystical writings of different traditions and following the lead of scholars of mysticism, I venture the following description: To be a mystic, or to have a religious experience, is to feel or become aware of That (notice “T”) which grounds us and connects us. It is to feel ourselves part of That which gives foundation or meaning to our own life and That which, at the same time, links us with other living beings, or with all that exists. In mystical experience we feel part of a bigger picture, and part of all the other parts that make up that bigger picture. And the bigger picture, despite all its contours, its ups and downs, it twists and pains – is a wonderful picture.

Mystical or religious experience, therefore, is a source of both inner peace and compassion for others. Peace comes from the sense of being grounded in that which gives meaning to our individual lives within the whole, and compassion springs from the sense of being with all the other beings; their well-being is part of the well-being of the whole and therefore part of our well-being. Furthermore, the That which is experienced as grounding and connecting us can be felt and imaged in a vast variety of ways, for it is sensed to be as real as it is more than, all images. So some mystics will feel more of its personal qualities and call it Father or Mother or Savior; others will sense that it is beyond all personal images and prefer to point to it as Spirit or Dharma or Nothing/Emptiness. Now, to be deeply religious and enter into the experience of That which grounds and connects us is also to be broadly religious. It is to realize, or at least suspect, that That which brings about and animates my religious experience is the same Reality that animates all others. Why do I say this? Simply because this is what mystics tell us – figures such as Ibn al-Arabi, Rumi, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Nicolas of Cusa, and more recently Mahatma Gandhi, Thomas Merton, the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat

Hanh. They all recognize that God or the Divine or the Truth that they have encountered in their own traditions is alive and well in other traditions.

Why do mystics say this? I think for two reasons, one personal and the other interpersonal. Personally, the Divine or the Truth that mystics experience is not only utterly real, it is also utterly more than what they are experiencing. The reality that mystics become aware of is as transcendent as it is immanent – just as much more than what they have experienced as it is truly what they have experienced. And this “more than” is active, communicative, available beyond the ways it has touched them and their lives. The Divine, for mystics, is both unable to be contained in any one expression and at the same time in need of many expressions. This leads naturally, and interpersonally, to what one might call mystical friendship. When mystics get to know each other, they naturally become friends. They sense that there is something in what all of them have discovered or are searching for that makes them brothers and sisters, or fellow-travelers. This was illustrated powerfully in the meeting of the Dalai Lama and Thomas Merton, as both of them described it. Merton realized that he had finally found “the real deal,” while His Holiness commented that “This was the first time that I had been struck by such a feeling of spirituality in anyone who professed Christianity.”³ As Merton elsewhere reflected: both of them sensed a communion between them that preceded and facilitated their communication.⁴ They were grounded and connected in the same Reality before they opened their mouths.

The dangers of “One Mysticism”

If all that we have pondered so far about the one mysticism in the many voices is true, it is also dangerous. To speak about one mystical experience within all the various religious voices, or to claim that there is one Divine Reality behind or within all the various mystical experiences, can cause problems. Such dangers are both human and divine – or more accurately, they threaten both the way we understand ourselves and the Divine. And false understandings usually lead, we know, to harmful actions.

In stressing the oneness of all mystical experiences, or in affirming the same divine Reality expressed by the different mystical voices, there is the dangerous possibility that we will minimize the differences between mystics. In so emphasizing the unity of all mystics we forget that the differences between them are real, ineradicable, and important. Let me briefly try to explain those three qualities of mystical differences.

- In claiming that the differences between a Christian and a Buddhist mystic are real, I am suggesting that these differences are not like the clothes we wear but like the skin we have. We can change clothes pretty much at will. Today in Berlin I’m wearing a shirt and tie. In Indonesia last month, I wore a sarong. But in both places, I had the same skin. My skin is part of who I am; I can’t climb out of it. The differences between mystics are something like that. This is what we hear from the so-called postmodern philosophers and theologians. But instead of

talking about skin, they reflect on language. They remind us that we don't first have experience and then try to express it in words. Rather, the words we are given by our culture deeply affect, even determine, and so limit, the kind of experiences we can have. We start with a voice – a Christian or a Buddhist or a Jewish voice – and that will determine the kind of mystical experience we do or can have. Different voices, different experiences; and the differences are not just “added on” or secondary to our experiences. The different voices are as real as the one mysticism.

- These differences won't go away because they can't go away: they're ineradicable, here to stay. So don't think we can ever finally get to, or give voice to, the one mysticism behind all the different mystical voices. Just as there is no one language behind all our different languages, there is no one, identifiable mysticism beyond all our different mystical experiences. Yes, we can all be trying to say the same thing in our different languages, or in our different religious experiences, but we will never find the one language to do so. To speak, we have to speak German or English or Japanese. To have a mystical experience, we have to have it in a particular religious language. There can never be a mystical Esperanto.
- All of which means that the different mystical voices are not only real and permanent, they are also important. If today we are aware of the importance of multiculturalism and the dangers of imperialism, we must also be aware of the importance of religious diversity and the dangers of religious absolutism. If we insist too simply that there is only one mysticism, we may forget that we are always speaking about that one mysticism with a particular religious or cultural voice. And so we may end up, unconsciously and unintentionally to be sure, imposing our voice on, or making it superior over, other voices. In using a Christian voice or language, for example, to describe the “one mysticism,” we may miss or suppress the Buddhist experience of anatta, or no-self. And we might do so simply because such a word doesn't exist in our Christian vocabulary and therefore in our Christian experience.

So differences matter. And we must recognize and respect them not just to avoid religious imperialism but also to make our interreligious, mystical dialogue possible. Without real differences between mystics there can be no real conversation between them. We learn from each other much more from our differences than from our similarities.

All of this means that there are many voices for the one mysticism, not simply because of human limitations but also because of divine richness – that is, the Divine contains and overflows with diversity. So it's not just that each mystic is limited by his/her own language; but also that the Divine, as it were, needs those limitations in order to find expression for the real differences that it contains. The Transcendent that can never be boiled down to a simple or smooth unity. The one God is many. As the Christian

theologian S. Mark Heim and the Jewish theologian Jonathan Sacks have recently argued, the very nature of God requires or needs the many religions and mysticisms.⁵ One of the most challenging statements of the value and necessity of the many mysticisms within the one mysticism was voiced by Raimon Panikkar many years ago:

It is not simply that there are different ways leading to the peak, but that the summit itself would collapse if all the paths disappeared. The peak is in a certain sense the result of the slopes leading to it It is not that this reality [the Divine Mystery] has many names as if there were a reality outside the names. This reality is the many names and each name is a new aspect.⁶

Two Different Mystical Practices

So how do we affirm and search for the one mysticism within the many mystical voices in a way in which we honor the real differences between the voices and the real differences within the Divine? Certainly, it requires an intellectual recognition that our differences won't go away and that we have a lot to learn from these differences. But how can we put this intellectual affirmation into practice? Or, how can we carry on a dialogue between mystics from different religions in such a way that the unity we feel between us will never absorb or minimize our real differences? In the rest of these reflections, I would like to make a suggestion: we can become more aware of, and challenged by, both our mystical unity and our mystical differences if, together, we make use of two forms of mystical practice and mystical dialogue – the mysticism of silence and the mysticism of service.

A. The Mysticism of Silence:

This is the mystical practice that most of us are familiar with – silence, retreat from the world, withdrawal into the cave of the heart, “contemplation.” It is the conviction that we find in all mystics - that the Reality they are experiencing or searching for can be found only in silence; though our experience of it begins with language, the Divine lies beyond all language

And so we have the many different mystical practices that all urge us to stop talking, and even to stop thinking: *zazen*, centering prayer, raja yoga, counting the breath, mindfulness, the Jesus Prayer, the *Namu Amida Butsu*, the dance of the whirling dervish. All of these exercises seek to turn off, as it were, the constant flow of words and thoughts that fill our mouths and minds; they try to move us beyond discursive thinking into that realm where we just “are” and where we can feel what it is like simply to be. For it is in such silence that we can hear the wordless voice of Mystery, of what *ibn-Arabi* calls “the really Real.”

Even when such mystical or contemplative practices make use of words, it is to get beyond words. This is most clearly the case of Zen koans, word puzzles intended, like little pieces of dynamite, to blow up and so dismantle our usual way

of thinking. But it is also true of mantras, or the “sacred word” in centering prayer, or the repetitions of the Jesus Prayer – we repeat the words in order to reach a point where we are no longer thinking of what they mean but feel or are what they mean. I think this is also what is taking place in the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, in which we do not turn off our thoughts or feelings but, rather, seek to observe them, to be fully mindful of them – in order no longer to be controlled or limited by them and so to be able to feel the Groundlessness or Mystery that sustains us amid all our changing thoughts and feelings. In all these practices, we seek to listen to “the sounds of Silence.”

Through such differing ways of practicing the mysticism of silence we are enabled to feel or become aware of the first ingredient of mystical experience: we feel connected with, part of, or one with the Reality that grounds us, that gives us meaning, that reveals to us the larger picture that we are part of. Through such experiences of the “Ground of our Being” (which Buddhists, in their really different language call the “Groundlessness of our Inter-being”), we touch and are touched by an inner, solid Peace that can sustain us amid the most violent or threatening of life’s storms.

B. The Mysticism of Service:7

To explain what I mean here, let me draw on an ancient and on a contemporary source – a Confucian and a Christian. The well-known illustration of the Confucian philosopher Mencius asks you to imagine a child sitting on the edge of a well. You are passing by when you see that the child has lost its balance is about the fall into the well. Immediately, spontaneously, without thinking you rush to the child’s side and grab him; everything in you stirs and is directed to saving that child. What you feel, Mencius tells us, is what all human beings – or at least the vast majority of humankind – would feel. When we meet another human who is suffering and about to fall to his or her death, something calls us, requires us, acts through us to reach out to help. Mencius calls it “the mind that cannot bear to see the suffering of others.”⁸ I call it the voice of the Divine, or the Spirit or Source that connects all of us and speaks, voicelessly but forcefully, in the sufferings and needs of others.

Many people who do reach out to the millions of children about to fall into a well would not necessarily identify this voice of the Divine; they just feel it and act. But when we do become conscious of it and try to name it, we are in touch, I suggest, with the “one mysticism” in the many “voices of the suffering.”

The contemporary Catholic theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, would, I believe, agree with Mencius. What Mencius calls “the mind that cannot bear the suffering of others,” Schillebeeckx describes as “negative experiences of contrast.” With this rather unwieldy term, he identifies what he feels is a universally verifiable

experience in all cultures: when faced with the specter of suffering due to human neglect, malice, exploitation – such as is found in the face of a starving child or in a polluted river – most human beings react to such negative experiences with a contrasting response: they find themselves crying out “No!” This is a spontaneous, explosive, undeniable sense of being called to resist, to assist, to do something. In the suffering of others, we are being claimed by something larger than our individual lives and concerns. For as Schillebeeckx goes on in his description, the “no” that shakes us up then leads to some kind of a “yes” to the action or effort necessary to relieve such suffering. We are not just claimed, we are called to act – even when we don’t know what to do, even when the situation seems hopeless. Again, there is a power, a voice, a shared presence that speaks to or touches us in such calls to serve as surely as it does in times of silent meditation.

Please note: in such a mysticism of service, we are not just engaged in actions that result from contemplation; we are not just “passing on the fruits of contemplation.” Rather, we are engaging in contemplation in the very moment in which we are acting and responding to the suffering victims of this earth. Such action is contemplation.

And the more we act, or the more we serve, the deeper is our contemplation, the richer is our sense of the Divine. Two authors (and friends) who have helped me understand this are S.J. in Sri Lanka and Jon Sobrino, S.J. in El Salvador. Both of them are activists, theologians, and, I must add, mystics. They describe how making a preferential option for the marginalized, struggling together with the poor, learning from them, suffering with them can become the context, or “the meditation room” in which we feel the presence and the power of the Spirit. To witness the courage and the hope of people who have no reason to hope, to encounter the horrors of death and martyrdom and then feel the power of life that can result from such death, to find oneself at the utter end of one’s own energies and abilities to carry on and then to find oneself revitalized in a religious ritual or in a party where people sing and dance in the midst of oppression and death, to feel claimed and energized by the “dangerous memories” of friends who have died in the struggle and whose memory does not allow you to give up – all these are ways in which the presence and reality of Something More makes itself real in our lives.

So if in the mysticism of silence we grow in awareness of That which grounds us and gives us inner, personal peace, in the mysticism of service we have the opportunity to sense and know That which connects us and calls us to care for and love each other. In the mysticism of silence, I feel that I am one with the Divine; in the mysticism of service I realize that I am one with you, in the Divine.

This is why I would go on to suggest that these two mystical practices are not just two different ways of doing the same thing. They are not just two different practices that yield the same fruit, the same awareness and knowledge of the Divine. Rather, I suspect that through these different mystical practices, we are put in touch with real differences within the Divine. Which means that if we adopt only one of these practices, we run the risk of missing something important, something essential, in mystical practice and in mystical awareness. I think the differences I am speaking about correspond to the ways the Divine Mystery both grounds us individually and personally and connects us socially and politically, or the ways in which the Divine calls us into the desert but also into the marketplace.

A Mystical Dialogue of Religions

To conclude, let me try to draw some practical consequences for an interreligious dialogue based on mysticism.

A mystical dialogue of silence will be an encounter in which we try to pass over to the religious experience of the other. We do this by trying not just to understand but to feel what the other believes. To do this, we have to enter into the world of the other by using not just our head but our heart – and that means our imagination and feelings. This requires that we try to make use of the spiritual practices of the other – their forms of meditation, of prayer, of ritual. It will also take the form of trying to enter into the stories, the images, the symbols and myths of the other tradition; to do this, we will have to let go and allow the stories and the symbols to take us where they will. Rather than just listening to the “music” of the other’s spirituality, we will try to “be the music,” or let the music play us.

What I’m trying to describe can better be illustrated in the kind of dialogue that has been going on over the past decades in the Contemplative or Monastic dialogue between Buddhists and Christians. They meet in each other’s monasteries, they live with each other and practice with each other, and tell each other their stories. The fruits of this dialogue, as seen in the participants’ lives and in the writings they have produced, is truly impressive and encouraging.⁹

In such a dialogue of silence or religious practice, we certainly become aware of the different practices and beliefs that we do have; but this dialogue, even more importantly, also makes certain, even though it doesn’t make clear, that there is indeed something common at the source of our differences. In this kind of dialogue we become especially aware of the one mysticism speaking in our different voices.

But I am urging that such dialogue of silence, already practiced, be balanced also by a dialogue of service. In this dialogue, we not only sit in meditation together, we act together. Such action begins first with identifying the forms of suffering – human as well as ecological – that are calling each of us. Who or where, in our own context or in our

own world, is the child about the fall into the well whom we all want to help? And then we will deliberate together about what can or must be done. Then, we will roll up our sleeves and act together, struggle together as we try to listen to and work with the victims of this world. In such acting and struggling together, we will become aware of the bonds that unite us as brothers and sisters; we will hear the same Voice that is calling us in the voices of the victims.

But, in such a dialogue of service, we will also become aware of our differences. For although there is one voice calling us to serve, each of us – Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews – will have different views of how to respond to suffering, how to confront injustice, how to deal with hatred and violence, how to change society and the world. But, as has been my limited experience, these real differences between us will usually turn out to be more complementary than contradictory. We will learn from our differences. Why? Because what is animating and guiding us in this dialogue of service is not the desire to prove that our view is more true or better than yours, but how we can all help the victims who have called us together – how we can help the children who are about to fall into the well.

In such a mystical dialogue that includes both silence and service we can deepen the spiritual unity of our religious communities and at the same time, further the worldly well-being of all creatures.

Notes

1. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), esp. chapter 3.
2. See Karl Rahner, "Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology," in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 17, (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 90-99.
3. *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., (HarperSanFrancisco1999), pp, 347-348; *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama*, (San Francisco: Harper Perennial, 1990), p. 189.
4. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, (New York: New Directions, 1973), pp. 311, 315.
5. S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2001), Part Three; Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, (New York: Continuum, 2002), Chapter 3.
6. Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981, rev. ed), pp. 24, 19.
7. I draw this term from the recent book of Aloysius Pieris, *The Mysticism of Service*, (Tulana, Sri Lanka: Tulana Jubilee Publications, 2000).
8. *Mencius 2A, 6*.
9. See, for example, *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics*, Donald W. Mitchell and James A. Wiseman, eds., (New York: Continuum, 1998).