

## What is Mysticism?

Recently a national Jewish organization, a popular promoter of Jewish mystical teachings, held a series of lectures here in Dallas. Unfortunately, I missed them, but I did have a chance to visit their office in New York while on my way to Israel. I frankly didn't know what to expect. This organization, it turns out, is in a corporate suite where consultations and lectures go on behind closed doors. It reminded me of a psychiatrist's waiting room – except that it had a gift shop. There I could purchase such things as Kabbalah tote bags. I could also buy mystical candles scents. Scents with titles like, "Certainty," "Protection," and (my favorite) "Prosperity." Ever wonder whether success really smells sweet? Well now I know – it smells like sandalwood.

Enshrouded as it now tends to be in therapeutic and commercial husks, the truly unique aspects of Kabbalah, indeed of all mysticism, is largely obscured. It becomes hard for an onlooker to take seriously. Yet mysticism is a subtle and sophisticated aspect of spirituality. So to what does the word "mysticism" actually refer?

In truth, mystical systems vary widely across religions. Thus broad generalizations are prone to error. Speaking about specifically Western (Jewish, Christian, and Islamic) mystics, however, they do seem to share these general traits:

First, mystics tend to see the Creator and the Creation as on a continuum, rather than as discrete entities. This is especially true with regards to the powerful mystical sense of kinship between God and humanity. Thus, in his magnificent poem, *The Dark Night*, Christian mystic John of the Cross writes, "O night more lovely than the dawn/O night that has united the Lover with his beloved/transforming the beloved into her Lover." Heady stuff. And even mystics who refuse to so boldly describe a fusion of God and man nevertheless find the whole of creation suffused in divinity, breaking down distinctions between God and the universe. Thus the Kabbalist Moses Cordovero writes, "The essence of divinity is found in every single thing, nothing but It exists...It exists in each existent."

Second, mystics yearn for direct, intuitive, unmediated encounter with such a close but concealed Deity. As Abraham Joshua Heschel puts it, "They want to taste the whole wheat of spirit before it is ground by the millstones of reason." Which is not to say that mystics are anti-rational. All western mystical traditions produce profound works of philosophy. But the mystic specifically seeks the experience of God, not merely knowledge about God.

Finally, in their quest to encounter God, mystics live spiritually disciplined lives. It is no coincidence that so much Christian mysticism is associated with monasticism. Sufis tend to be ascetics. And Jewish mystics create *hanagot*, personal daily devotional practices. Thus, in his will, one Kabbalist recommended this regime to his sons: Periods of morning, afternoon, evening and midnight prayer; two hours devoted to Bible, four and a half to Talmud, two to ethical and mystical texts, and two to other Jewish texts; one and a half hours to daily care, time to make a living – and five hours to sleep!

All of which helps explain why, despite the many appealing aspects of mystical teachings, there are so few true mystics around. Many are intrigued, but few can commit. Certainly mystics are not usually to be found at book signings and weekend seminars, whatever PR people may say. Despite the implied promises made in the popular media, the mystical path is no lazy man's road to enlightenment.

Still, there is much the spiritually hungry non-mystic can learn from the mystics within their own traditions: things such as self-discipline, enthusiasm (in its original sense, "being filled with God"), and above all, not to settle for the kind of spiritual superficiality and religious minimalism that characterizes so much of America today.