

Is there a secret to becoming a secular mystic?



Highland Views

Chris Highland

Guest columnist

Someone sent me a flyer for an upcoming "Mystic Summit" bringing together some of the "spiritual stars" of mysticism, those who study it, practice it or claim to be mystics. This got me thinking: what is mysticism? What, or who, is a mystic? And, is it possible for a secular person to have a mystical experience?

In the introduction to her book, "Ecstasy: The World of Sufi Poetry and Prayer," Dr. Nahid Angha writes: "[The mystical Sufi poem] as a whole resembles a tightly-bound package, a treasure-box for the reader to unpack or a joyful puzzle for the reader to solve, and in its unpacking through careful reflection, one attains insights of understanding."

I taught a class on "Mystics of the World," introducing students to a selection of representatives from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Indigenous traditions. One common thread was the claim to have a direct (unmediated) connection or relation to something divine, sacred, universal. Mystics are people who have ineffable experiences and then talk or write about them. Sound contradictory? Of course. Part of what makes mysticism so mystical is that mystics often talk about silence – they use words to express the wordless.

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, wrote: "Since God cannot be seen or imagined, the visions of God we read of the saints having are not so much visions 'of'

Him as visions 'about' Him; for to 'see' any limited form is not to see Him." We can't even imagine God. Merton continues: "God cannot be understood except by Himself. If we are to understand Him we can only do so by being in some way transformed into Him, so that we know Him as He knows Himself ... and we will not know Him as He knows Himself until we are united to what He is." ("New Seeds of Contemplation").

I know there's something quite profound in Merton's words here, but I couldn't tell you what any of this means. And that's the heart of mysticism. The mystic speaks and we are left to unpack the package and solve the puzzle. The person of faith may feel they know what the mystic means – "yes, I've had that experience" – yet the rest of us can't help thinking what we've heard makes no sense. The words evaporate even as you read them. Merton might say that's exactly his point.

Julian of Norwich, famous for her bloody vision of Christ on the cross, viewed God primarily as feminine. "God chose to become our Mother in all ways ... Our true Mother Jesus, embodiment of all love ... labors to carry us inside himself, until we come to full term Only he who is our true Mother and source of all life may rightfully be called by this name. Nature, love, wisdom, and knowledge are all attributes of the Mother, which is God." ("Revelations of Divine Love")

Mystics are sculptors of images even as they delight in their iconoclasm (iconoclast: destroyer of images). Julian not only presents an image of the Motherhood of God (Mother Jesus!) but says the divine attributes include nature as well as knowledge. This is critical for mystics. The Unknown is central to mystical experience. Sacred secrets are known only to a few ecstatic individuals who claim esoteric knowledge (esoteric:

"understood by only a small number of people with a specialized knowledge"). Mystics believe they possess rare knowledge of the unknown. Though they may climb to a peak, mystics don't hold summits.

Near the end of his life, Lakota visionary Black Elk stood high up in the Black Hills and shed tears that his vision of the "sacred hoop" and "blossoming tree" of his people seemed a tragic failure. The hoop was broken and the sheltering tree withered. Yet: "It may be that some little root of the sacred tree still lives" ("Black Elk Speaks"). Sadly, the old mystic saw that "the greening earth, the only mother" would live on, but his people might not. Mystics can be mistaken; visions can be wrong.

Teresa of Avila wrote that "God doesn't even entrust this secret to our own mind" ("The Interior Castle"). I'm fascinated by the unknowns too, the secrets of our universe, but I don't see how a secular person could be a mystic, have a "mystical experience" or know anything about secrets our mind can't begin to imagine. Mystics speak in riddles often packaged in poetic verse, scriptural allusion or "visionary" language. They appear to be insightful people who report remarkable experiences. However, it's no secret a free-thinker remains skeptical of "special knowledge," insider secrets and ecstatic summits. A secular view is grounded in knowledge gained through reason, common human experience and the world of our senses – with treasures and puzzles aplenty.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. His latest books are "A Freethinker's Gospel" and "Broken Bridges." Learn more at chiehland.com.