Is a feeling of awe or connection a 'mystical' experience?



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Observing a leaf-green mantis near the window I could tell by the way its head turned it was observing me as well. As far as I could tell it wasn't praying, but it was clearly preying on unaware insects crawling up the holly tree. It almost felt like a mystical moment.

A reader asked about mysticism, having read that I used to teach courses on the mystics in world religions. I suggested the book "The Essential Mystics" by Andrew Harvey, then explained how my views on mysticism have evolved since teaching that course.

The word "mystic" comes from a Greek term for closing the eyes and mouth. It apparently referred to being initiated into a religious cult. A full modern definition states: "a person who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain unity with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond the intellect." You seek and contemplate in order to feel one with the divine, or you believe you can sense certain "hidden truth" outside your reasoning mind. Note that the seeker already believes in Someone or Something greater (perhaps within them).

When Jesus says, "Seek and you will find," or "Seek first the kingdom of God," the seeker already believes what they will find. In other words, you may find just what you are seeking. What this means is that a Hindu seeking the face of Krishna, will find the face of Krishna, as will a Buddhist find Buddha or a Christian finds Christ. We don't hear stories about a Christian seeking a closer connection to Christ and discovering Shiva or a Goddess instead.

The Christian-Hindu Bede Griffiths – a Benedictine monk who opened an ashram community in India – told a story of his own "mystical experience."

"I walked out alone in the evening and heard the birds singing in that full chorus of song, which can only be heard at that time of the year at dawn or at sunset. I remember now the shock of surprise with which the sound broke on my ears. It seemed to me that I had never heard the birds singing before and I wondered whether they sang like this all the year round and I had never noticed it. I came upon some hawthorn trees in full bloom and again I thought I had never seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness before. If I had been brought suddenly among the trees of the Garden of Paradise and heard a choir of angels singing I could not have been more surprised. A lark rose suddenly from the ground beside the tree, and then sank back still singing. Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God." (quoted in "The Essential Mystics")

Pay attention to the words he uses. He's alone with the birds, the trees, watching the sunset – very natural. His "feeling of awe" leads him to feel the need to worship, to think of heaven, angels and God. We aren't surprised a monk would feel this. He sees and hears what he "never noticed" before. So, why is he considered a mystic?

What is called "mystical" points to the supernatural – beyond, behind or above nature – with the intent to experience or connect with the metaphysical, the nonrational and ineffable (beyond description). As with many elements of religion, once you say you have experienced something beyond the senses, beyond reason, can you say anything? By definition, there are no words to describe the indescribable, no contemplation of what is beyond comprehension.

Earlier I used the phrase "mystical sense." The irony should be apparent. A mystical experience transcends the senses. It is "paranormal" – not normal, extra-ordinary. What is it about feeling a relation or connection to something ordinary, natural and normal that transforms it into the realm of religious faith? The point is, you start with faith and end with faith. You find what you seek. Or, on the other hand, you don't find what you seek, and you are surprised or shocked.

Someone might walk into the woods, or gaze from a mountain or ocean shore, looking for an encounter with something or someone beyond nature. What may be a very emotional moment either feels mystical, or intensely, wonderfully natural. It depends what we're looking for.

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