

1 What is it?

A category within the broader context of religious experience in which we are overwhelmingly aware of the ultimate; utterly swept up in the presence of God. Intensely personal, otherworldly and transcendent; an experience in which the recipient in some way touches and communicates with the divine and with levels of reality beyond those of the spatio-temporal world.

The Christian mystic is regarded as one who has been raised to a high degree of contemplative prayer. The mystical experience consists in a conscious, deep, and intimate union of the soul with God...while the soul, on its part, has prepared itself, normally according to an accepted pattern of asceticism.

Clifton Wolters, *Introduction to Revelations of Divine Love*

2 A personal experience

I was sitting on a low wall on the outskirts of the town of C. Across the road was a wayside 'tea-shop' stall with the proprietor in full view serving two customers. The branches of two small trees next to the stall waved in the moderately strong breeze and the sun shone with some glare on the white, dusty road, along which came some fishermen with baskets of fish on their heads. From the second storey of a nearby building I could hear a nautch tune.

Then, as the fishermen came abreast of me, one fish, alive, flapped up and seemed to stand on its tail and bow. I felt a great compassion for the fish. Suddenly everything was transformed, transfigured, translated, transcended. All was fused into one. I was the fish. The sun sang and the road sang. The music shone. The hands of the stall-keeper danced. The branches of the trees danced. All in time with the same music and I was the fish, the fishermen, the hands of the stall-keeper, the trees, the branches, the road, the sun, the music: all one and nothing separate. Not parts of the one but the one itself.

I was at the time 47 years old, male, born in a [Roman] Catholic family. I could not accept that teaching as given. I was born in a small country town of Australia.

Account of a contemporary mystical experience, Alister Hardy, Religious Experience Research Centre

3 The English Middle Ages

- A more personal approach to religion evolved — the suffering Christ, cult of the Virgin Mary, the swing away from institutional religion — which encouraged a growth in mysticism.
- The **Anchorite** tradition was closely associated with mysticism.
- Four of the greatest English mystics emerged during this period. All were **solitaries** or were writing for solitaries: Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle, and the authors of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *Ladder of Perfection*.
- **Julian of Norwich** received 16 'showings' on 8 May 1373 during a time of dire sickness. Although she describes herself as 'uneducated', her evaluations of these showings are insightful and profound:

Our Lord showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazelnut, in the palm of my hand; and it was as round as a ball. I looked thereupon with the eye of my understanding, and thought: 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus: 'It is all that is made'. I marvelled how it might last, for methought it might suddenly have fallen to naught for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: 'It lasteth and ever shall last for that God loveth it. And so All-thing hath Being by the love of God. In this Little Thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second that God loveth it, the third that God keepeth it.

Julian of Norwich

Only if we deny any possibility of divine communication can Julian's claims be completely ruled out.

Clifton Wolters

Mysticism

Studies of religious experience can be enhanced by an understanding of mysticism, as this revision spread shows

RSReviewExtras



Go to www.hoddereducation.co.uk/RSreviewextras for a printable PDF of this poster.

4 The Spanish Catholic Reformation

Teresa of Ávila, the best-known Spanish mystic, was a Carmelite nun who experienced ecstatic visions of hell and the Holy Spirit, and direct and personal experience of the love of God, which she described as a 'mystical marriage'. She used her experiences (and generous support from wealthy relatives) to institute practical reform of the Carmelite order with far greater emphasis on the expression of personal, biblical faith, rather than the scholarly emphasis on reason and intellectualism within religious belief.

7 Numinous

Rudolph Otto coined the term *numinous* to describe the event, though it is not exclusive to mystical religious experiences. He traced it back to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, which he said was the origin of religion. In mystical experiences, the individual was both attracted and repelled by a sense of awe and wonder.

Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.

Luke 5:8

Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

Isaiah 6:5

5 Philosophy

- a profound sense of union and unity with the divine
- time is transcended
- it is a 'noetic' experience (William James) or a 'showing' (Mother Julian of Norwich) — in other words, not just a subjective experience, but something is clearly revealed to the experient
- a sense of joy and wellbeing

6 Preparation

- 1 **Purgation** — ridding the soul of tendencies that prevent it from paying attention.
- 2 **Illumination** — preliminary disclosures which focus attention.
- 3 **Contemplation** — the stage in which the presence of the divine penetrates the believer.

8 Theological and philosophical problems

- 'Sir, the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing.' (Bishop Butler to John Wesley)
- Spiritual elitism (gnosticism).
- Rejection of the church and the sacraments as the ministers of God's grace.
- Opposed to ethical and eschatological doctrines.
- Problems of testing the validity of mystics and their experiences: 'Levitations, ecstasies, trances and the like...prove nothing — not even the holiness of the entrances.' (Clifton Wolters)
- What may validate mystical experience?
- Can they prove the existence of God?

But:

As long as it flourishes, it constitutes a continual challenge to what William James calls 'a premature closing of accounts with reality' in terms of an exclusively ethical, institutional, theological or intellectual presentation of religion... The mystic's witness to the accessibility of the living presence... in the hearts of contemporary men and women has been an enormous encouragement to the religious yearnings of men.

Douglas V. Steere