

The American Mystic Unveiled

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Photo date and location unknown

Poets and philosophers have them. "Hard-headed" scientists like Sigmund Freud and Bertrand Russell recognized their existence.

Into our lives even at times of despair, can come unexpectedly an extraordinary experience -- intense, overwhelming, indescribable -- an experience characterized by joy, light, peace, fire, warmth, unity, certainty, confidence, rebirth. All these terms have been applied to such experiences, which have been recorded at every period of history, every place on the globe. But the most universal theme seems to be that it is an intense, overpowering joy which seems literally to lift you out of yourself.

Buddha and Mohammad began their religious preaching after such experiences. The Bible describes at least two which Jesus had-at the time of his temptation ("And behold, angels came and ministered to him") and on the Mount of Transfiguration. Paul was knocked off his horse by a flash of light (Acts 9:3-4). Joan of Arc had such an experience before leading her troops into battle.

Four out of Ten

And Americans all over this country are having them today in great number. That is the conclusion of two staff members of the Center for the Study of American Pluralism at the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. Andrew M. Greeley, a Roman Catholic priest and program director of the center, and William C. McCready, associate program director, discovered that four out of ten Americans have had at least one such ecstatic experience, 600 of the 1500 persons asked the question: Have you ever had the feeling of being very close to a powerful spiritual force that seems to lift you out of yourself?

Though they describe themselves as "thoroughly un-mystical" themselves, the authors of the article which appeared in the New York Times Magazine in January explain that they were primarily motivated by curiosity. Most psychologists tend to think that mystical experiences are evidence of a disturbed personality-the mystic is a misfit, an incipient psychotic unable to cope with the real world and fleeing to one of make-believe. But the people the authors knew who had had such experiences didn't appear to fit into those categories. So, into a representative national survey of ultimate values among some 1500 American adults they slipped a handful of questions to determine how many are having these experiences, what kinds of people are likely to have them, and what impact these episodes have on their lives.

While such experiences are of their very nature often inexpressible, and so the survey technique may seem dubious, Greeley and McCready argue that it is a good place to begin. "Those mystics who are discovered by a national survey are likely to be very different from the college freshman who volunteers for psychological experimentation or the wandering mystic who drops into a researcher's laboratory."

Who, then, are having these intense spiritual experiences? People in their 40's and 50's are somewhat more likely to report "mystical" episodes than those in their 70's or their teens. Protestants are more likely to experience them than Jews, and Jews more likely than Catholics. Within the Protestant denominations, it is not the fundamentalists who are the most frequent "mystics," but the Episcopalians (more than half of them). And within the two major denominational groups, the Irish are more likely than their coreligionists, either Protestant or Catholic, to be "mystics."

Who's Having Them?

Most of those reporting such experiences are religious in the sense of being affiliated with one of the major denominations and they attend church, but there is a tendency for them not to be "churchy." They also seem to have an extremely strong sense of confidence in life after death, the authors report.

The "mystics" are also disproportionately male, black, college-educated, above the \$10,000-a-year income level, and Protestant. Furthermore, the relationship between frequent ecstatic experiences and psychological well-being is the highest possible according to the Psychological Well-Being Scale developed by Professor Norman Bradburn. "There is nothing on the surface, then, which would indicate that, either socially or psychologically, the ecstasies are deprived or disturbed."

Findings Dismissed

In a society conditioned to seek rational explanations for everything, it is natural that these results met with skepticism. Their findings were dismissed as "impossible" and "misleading," and funding agencies responsible for mental health research simply didn't believe them.

Those who refuse to accept evidence for phenomena which they cannot see or measure will, however, admit the existence of X-rays, electricity, and other forces which they also cannot see. We know they exist because we can see and measure their effects.

These natural forces are a part of our life, and it is important to know the laws behind them so that we can live in accordance with those natural laws. It is just as important to understand the other forces around us, not yet universally recognized as natural, yet just as much a part of our lives, if not more so, than those we already accept.

The unseen "spiritual" world of which these "mystical" experiences are one expression, remains to be explored and understood. To dismiss the findings of this survey without serious investigation is not the scientific method, which has at its heart the principle of holding an open mind until all evidence has been collected and evaluated. Obviously, the people interviewed in this sampling were experiencing something. If it doesn't fit in with established views, then this needs to be investigated further, not automatically dismissed as "impossible."

Even the skeptical agnostic William James concluded in his study of Varieties of Religious Experience that while "non-mystics are under no obligation to acknowledge in mystical states a superior authority conferred on them by their intrinsic nature... the existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictator of what we may believe."

That is one lesson to be drawn from these reports. There is another, more internal lesson, to think about. Isolated cases in the past have come down to us. But now we find a widespread upsurge in such episodes not just among traditional mystics but among everyday people involved in everyday pursuits, and occurring spontaneously rather than after spending years of meditation seeking to achieve a brief experience of ecstasy. What is the significance of this?

"I will pour out my Spirit"

The Bible says (Acts 2: 17-18): "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit..."

The last days is a time when man draws closer to God and to restoring God's sovereignty of goodness. As we approach God, raising our spiritual standard generation after generation, we come to the time when the spiritual senses dulled by the human fall eons ago are reawakened bit by bit in increasing numbers of people.

The phenomenon is happening not just in the United States, where statistical methods make it perhaps more observable, but all over the globe, including nations where atheism is the current norm.

While those who experienced the "mystical" episodes reported in this study were not especially seeking them or expecting them, in most cases the experience was one which was described as the most memorable in their whole lives; they could never be the same. The sociologist authors did not seek to use their evidence to prove the existence of God and not even the respondents necessarily drew those conclusions, but obviously something is happening. These new-found "mystics" are an omen of the spiritual reawakening that all of mankind is on the verge of experiencing.