

Mysticism, True and False

This article lists characteristics of the true and the false mystic. The mystic in this context is someone in immediate contact with God, either as the recipient of visions, revelations, or other extraordinary favors or as the holy person gifted with classical infused contemplation, which is also called mystical union. In the first case the contact with God is through faith but via charismatic phenomena, which belong to the sensibility. Mystical union, on the other hand, is a profound, spiritual transformation of the whole human being in faith and love. Only this latter is mysticism in the proper sense.

Charismatic gifts are perceived to be direct divine interventions beyond ordinary, natural processes. Such gifts, however, are not necessarily miraculous; they usually have obvious relationship to the personal history and the cultural ambience of the recipient. They are acts of religious enthusiasm and are judged to be authentic if (a) they are morally good actions, (b) they are honestly perceived as gifts from God, (c) they are not patently aberrations in the psychological or spiritual orders, and (d) they bear salutary fruit in the person and the community. These charisms are external graces and are, therefore, secondary and accidental in the spiritual life. Their value lies entirely in the faith and love they inspire.

False charismatics usually show signs of imbalance, delusion and even deception; they give exaggerated attention to the sensational or bizarre aspects of their experiences, thereby losing sight of the purpose of the gifts. Pride and self-glorification, magical thinking, and indocility are marks of the misguided charismatic.

Mystical union constitutes the mystic in the true sense. An isolated experience is possible in anyone's life, but the habitual state

argues to the presence of a high degree of the state of grace. The mystical experience may be accompanied by charismatic gifts such as visions or miraculous powers, but its essence is precisely the ineffable experience of overwhelming love of God, a person-to-person encounter with the living God beyond images or concepts and with a personal certitude of the divine presence. The experience remains within the limits of faith and, therefore, it is beyond objective verification.

Certain signs authenticate the mystic's claim to the experience. A mature, well-balanced person is the ideal subject, though neurosis as such is not ruled out as long as the exercise of human freedom remains intact. A good moral life is presupposed, since the mystical state means a very close relationship with God. Instant mysticism without ascetical preparation is not a likelihood in the Catholic tradition. The true mystic will be committed to the word of God and the sacraments, to the creed and code of the community, and to the service of the neighbor and the world. The mystic is especially cognizant of the passive or "given" quality of the experience, a fact that translates itself into deep humility and abiding gratitude.

False mystics lack one or more of the above factors. Serious psychological problems that take away freedom are incompatible with mystical union. So are disordered lives that contradict the teaching of the gospel. The empirical experience of the divine union as well as other charismatic phenomena are accessory to the union of wills in love and may be absent without prejudice to the essential mystical state. The true mystic is one who experiences, not only an altered state of consciousness, which is a variable, but a profound conversion of life.

Bibliography: Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (London: Eagle, 1991).