

Relics, Remnants, and Religion: An Undergraduate Journal in Religious Studies

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 1

May 2016

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Recommended Citation

Ellingson, Hannah (2016) "Mysticism without God: The Alaskan Experience," *Relics, Remnants, and Religion: An Undergraduate Journal in Religious Studies*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/relics/vol1/iss1/1>

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Mysticism without God: The Alaskan Experience

By Hannah Ellingson

Written for Greta Austin's class

Mysticism: The Spiritual Search in the Christian Tradition

I. Introduction

Every definition and experience of mysticism we have considered in this class hinges on a closeness with God, whether in the sense of an all-encompassing “One,” in the Early Christian conception of Plotinus, or in the spiritual encounters Annie Dillard describes as part of her daily life. As a person who considers myself agnostic and does not believe in a god in the manner in which God has been described in these accounts of mysticism, I began to wonder if it is possible to have a mystical experience without the religious beliefs often associated with mysticism. In many of the texts we have studied, I felt that I could relate strongly to the experiential aspect of mysticism, but not to the underlying Christian religious tradition and depiction of God to whom these experiences were attributed. In this essay, I aim to explore whether or not mystical experience is possible without belief in a higher spiritual authority, and if it is, what this experience would look like.

The notion of mystical experience without God is not wholly incompatible with one of the most common definitions of mysticism, outlined in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Though there are inherent issues in attempting to define a category of experience which is by its nature very personal and subjective, the Encyclopedia's definition draws upon a wide body of primary and secondary sources from a variety of religious traditions. In attempting to articulate a definition which is applicable to virtually every religious tradition, the *Encyclopedia of Religion* has described mystical experience through a set of common characteristics rather than as the encounter of any specific divine presence. While every account of mysticism described in the

Encyclopedia does involve experience with some higher spiritual authority, a mystical experience is defined primarily by its characteristics of ineffability, noetic quality, passivity, transiency, and integration with reality at a higher level than it is experienced in daily life.¹ These characteristics, while they can be interpreted as the result of a divine encounter, do not intrinsically require the existence of a god. The Encyclopedia of Religions, drawing from William James' characterization of mysticism who bases his assumption on all religions sharing a "common core," has seemingly opened the definition of mystical experience to include experiences, which are not informed by a particular belief in any religious tradition.

Definitions of religion focusing on Jamesian core characteristics, however, have been criticized for their failure to take into account not only how cultural and religious background influences how an individual interprets a "mystical" experience, but also how the individual experience is informed and shaped by pre-existing beliefs.² It is therefore, pragmatic to take into account other definitions of mystical experience, which are specific to our cultural context. Bernard McGinn's definition of Christian mysticism as "a special consciousness of the presence of God that by definition exceeds description and results in a transformation of the subject who receives it"³ has been widely accepted in academic discussions of the subject. In specifically Christian mysticism, it is logical that the existence of a Christian God should be a precondition for mystical experience to occur (though this also becomes hard to define due to denominational differences within Christianity). This would seem to deny the possibility of mystical experience in a society heavily influenced by Western Christianity without such a notion of God.

¹ Louis Dupre, "Mysticism [First Edition]" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 6341-6342.

² Wayne Proudfoot, "Mysticism," in *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 121.

³ Bernard McGinn, cited in Julia A. Lamm, "What is Christian Mysticism?" in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Julia A. Lamm (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 3.

When Bruce Lincoln describes spiritual connection as one relating to both the divine and the temporal, the matter becomes more complicated. Lincoln views religion as an instrument of “sociocosmic reunion,” which consists of two elements: the vertical and the horizontal.⁴ The vertical constitutes what many Christian mystics have described as a connection to a cosmic, higher, spiritual authority.⁵ The equally important horizontal element consists of connection to and unity with other people, allowing an individual to access human nature at a more profound level than is felt in everyday life.⁶ This relocates the focus of mystic experience from a personal goal of unity with the divine to a worldly aim of achieving a deeper sense of connection to the essence of humanity. It is this latter sense of mortal, or human, spiritual experience to which I relate and wish to explore. While I will emphasize a connection to the human rather than the divine, the experience I intend to focus on shares many elements within the Christian mystical texts we have studied.

II. Context- Dislocation of the Self

In order to explain what I consider to be an important mystical experience in my life, some background information is necessary. Last summer, I took a job working at a fish processing plant in the rural metropolis of Naknek, Alaska- population, 544.⁷ I have difficulty remembering exactly why I applied for the job, much less accepted their offer of hundred-hour work weeks handling dead fish in varying states of dismemberment. Several of my friends had already applied, and it seemed like a good way to make a lot of money in just a few weeks. And, amid the February Tacoma state of constant drizzle and the academic stress of midterms, hard

⁴ Bruce Lincoln, “A Lakota Sundance and the Problematics of Sociocosmic Reunion,” in *History of Religions* vol. 34, no. 1 (1994): 1-2, accessed 20 April 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062976>.

⁵ Ibid, 3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Naknek, Alaska,” *City Data*, accessed 20 April 2014, <http://www.city-data.com/city/Naknek-Alaska.html>.

physical labor in the Alaskan wilderness somehow seemed like an appealing idea. The fishery's website advertises this position as "difficult; conditions are often cold, wet, and monotonous, and work can be 16 hours per day for weeks on end."⁸ This description is accurate. The radical divide between the living conditions of a fish factory worker and the manner I lived previously served to entirely dislocate my perception of both the environment and myself. This particular fishery is not located in the scenic part of Alaska. Every detail of the landscape seems to be painted in myriad shades of grey from the sky, to the processing plant, to the river location. The room I shared with five of my friends was essentially a large wooden box with a roof and beds. Everything I owned was perpetually covered in sand and smelled of fish. The fishery was the site of an impending shift in my personal perception.

The environment and schedule of factory life worked to create a structure of time unlike anything I have experienced before or since. Since it is so far north of the equator, Alaska receives about twenty-one hours of daylight at the peak of summer. Working sixteen hour days, it is virtually impossible to get more than five and a half hours of sleep each night. After several weeks of this lifestyle, days no longer exist and minutes seem infinite. Similar to the asceticism of the Desert Fathers, the extreme physical conditions of this job effectually "suspend[ed] constraints of space and time in order to induce another form of awareness."⁹ Time became inconsistent, which caused me to regard my surroundings and myself in relation to them with a different perspective.

This restructuring of time was accompanied by a rearrangement of priorities and values. Basic biological functions became the primary concern. Eating, which in my conscious memory

⁸ "Employment," *Leader Creek Fisheries*, accessed 20 April 2014, <http://leadercreekfisheries.com/employment/>.

⁹ Patricia Cox Miller, "Desert Asceticism and 'The Body from Nowhere,'" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* vol. 2, no. 2 (1994): 144.

had always been an exercise in control and monitoring, became a challenge to consume a day's worth of calories in ten minutes. Every day was structured around the pursuit of sleeping as much as possible. Social anxiety was made impossible as socializing with coworkers became increasingly necessary in order to survive the monotony of performing the same simple task, uninterrupted, for four hours at a time. My life was deconstructed and reassembled in a different order in the span of a week. As I became more familiar with my new environment, I began to recognize myself less.

III. Experience

On the Fourth of July, the factory workers were given the afternoon off, our first break from sixteen hour shifts in two weeks. Accordingly, my roommates decided to throw a party in our box-room. Repelled by the smell of twenty-five fish factory workers in a six-person space and the raucous laughter of people I barely knew, I went out for a walk. An indeterminate amount of time later, I found myself sitting on a discarded tractor tire, watching the midnight sunset over the Naknek River.

Some locals were setting off fireworks from their boat, the pyrotechnic effect perfectly reflected in the water. Though I was familiar with the tradition of fireworks, it struck me that I no longer understood the point. Manufacturing displays of sound and color to celebrate the principles upon which our nation was founded seemed less patriotic than a macabre memorial to the deceased ideals that we still believe we represent. This display seemed less like the blithe festivities of my childhood than Hildegard's vision of the devil as "a burning light, as large and as high as a mountain, divided at its summit as if into many tongues."¹⁰ Prompted by the awareness of a different reality, I experienced disillusionment with our patriotism and with the

¹⁰ Hildegard of Bingen, "Vision 7- The Devil," *Hildegard's Scivias*, accessed 27 April 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/primary/scivias.html>.

society that propagated it. I was dislocated not only from my identity as an individual, but also from the national identity that had shaped the social consciousness ascribing meaning to my life and experiences.¹¹ I felt a connection not to the fireworks, but to their reflection in the water, an illumination on the surface of something darker, profound, and continually changing.

At this moment, it occurred to me how completely I had changed in the previous weeks. My physical form, capable of more strength and endurance than I had thought possible, was no longer familiar to me. I existed in a context devoid of my traditional conception of time, where the things I had been taught to value meant little and my life was defined by the dictates of a force entirely outside of my control. Stripped of agency and everything I had considered to constitute myself, I began to question what the constructed “self” even means. In this search for meaning, “the human spirit takes no rest. It presses on further into the vortex, the source in which the spirit originates.”¹² In further contemplation, pressing on into “the vortex,” I found no god in the traditional sense of the word, but rather a more complete understanding of myself.

Bill Viola has described the sensation of looking across the limitless horizon of the desert in a manner similar to my experience: “You finally realize the void is yourself. . . Inside becomes outside. You can see what you are.”¹³ Isolation from both my sense of self and my environment enabled me to perceive the interrelation of the two. For a brief period, I “came into [my] own mind and transcended”¹⁴ the scope of ordinary awareness. In this instant, I understood that I am more than what society has conditioned me to be, that I influence my environment

¹¹ Leo Tolstoy “The Kingdom of God is within You,” in *The Lion and the Honeycomb: The Religious Writings of Tolstoy* ed. A.N. Wilson, trans. Robert Chandler (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 83.

¹² Meister Eckhart, “The Will is Free,” in *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, trans. and ed. Raymond Bernard Blakney (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1941), 192.

¹³ Bill Viola, cited in David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture* (Somerset, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 116.

¹⁴ Augustine of Hippo, “Book Nine,” *The Confessions*, in *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism, Second Edition*, ed. Louis Dupré and James A. Wiseman (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 60.

equally as I am influenced by it, and that the “self” exists in the space of these interactions between myself as an individual and myself as my surroundings.

The relationship of the individual as a separate, incomplete entity to humanity as a fragmented whole is complex. Walt Whitman writes in his poem, “Song of Myself,” “I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself.”¹⁵ While I perceive others and my relation to them, I will never be able to live beyond my own experience. The realization of my relation to society is concurrent with the revelation that this is a dynamic I will never be able to fully comprehend or control. St. John of the Cross writes, “my spirit was given/ an understanding while not understanding/ *transcending all knowledge*.”¹⁶ Faced with the direct apprehension of a force larger than myself, I was compelled to accept my place in the scope of human existence. I am inextricably bound within the cycle of humanity, in a state of constant creation; both the creation of myself as a product of the environment I live in, and the power of creation that I influence over this same space.

As is characteristic of mystical experiences, this contemplative moment was transient and ended before I was quite aware it had begun. However, as the transformative element of McGinn’s definition would suggest, this brief encounter with a different level of reality has nonetheless had a sustained impact on how I perceive myself and my relationship to others. As a result, I cultivate all the more, an appreciation of these relationships and the fleeting moments where I am able to perceive them. Henry David Thoreau concludes this manner of mystic

¹⁵ Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001), 6.

¹⁶ John of the Cross, “Stanzas Concerning an Ecstasy Experienced in High Contemplation,” in *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism, Second Edition*, ed. Louis Dupré and James A. Wiseman (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 357.

experience well: “Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 111.

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