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A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Stage of Religion:  
Towards a  
Description

March 2022

# The Mystical Stage of Religion: Towards a Description

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By now most of us are familiar with the prophecy made by the eminent theologian, Karl Rahner: “The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.” It was a wise prediction to make over forty years ago, one that continues to be a stimulus for reflection, discussion and indeed inspiration. The truth is all Christians are called to be mystics. A mystic is an adult Christian or, to put it another way, a mystic is a mature Christian. According to the religious writer and theologian, Friedrich von Hugel (1852-1925), there are *three* stages to our religious development, the institutional, the critical and mystical and we are meant to move into the mystical stage in adult life. This is our vocation; it is our calling.

In this article I would like to offer a description of what it means to be in the *mystical* stage of religion. I am aware that this is no small undertaking. Mysticism is universal to all faiths and it has many interpretations and explanations. I am no expert on the topic, but this doesn’t matter. I believe there is nothing to fear about the mystical. Becoming a mystic is more attainable than we might think. Here I wish to present a contemporary description which may help to bring mysticism down to earth. Whether or not you agree with my description, I do hope you will at least find my language accessible.

Even in the mystical stage of religion we are not the finished article, we remain in process; we are still growing and we are still struggling. This is reflected in the way I present my material. So what is happening in the mystical stage of religion? I suggest the following *six* things:

## 1. WE ARE CLAIMING OUR BELOVEDNESS

Our belovedness is our original blessing, our core truth, our deepest identity, the face we had before we were born as the Buddhists

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would say. Our belovedness is who we are in the eyes of God. It is the image of God within us, our true self. We were born with our belovedness and we will die with our belovedness. Nothing can taint, contaminate or destroy our belovedness. It is eternal.

Because of our belovedness we are not our gender, our nationality, our ethnicity, our skin colour, our social class. These are all temporary costumes more associated with our false self. To claim our belovedness is to know where our value really comes from. It is to know who we are. It is to have answered the question: Who do I really belong to? To claim our belovedness is to know that nothing else matters. And when we know that nothing else matters we can begin to stop protecting all the things in our lives that make us feel significant and secure. To claim our belovedness is to know that our significance and security are to be found in *God*.

It is because of our belovedness that we are loved and loveable as we are. Indeed, it is because of our belovedness that we can say with complete conviction, “We are unconditional love.” Ultimately then, to claim our belovedness is to accept in our hearts that we are loved unconditionally. This acceptance, of course, does not come easy to any of us. We seem to be programmed to fall back into conditional love; conditional love is our default position. This is why in order to claim our belovedness we need to be exposing ourselves on a regular basis to the unconditional love of God. It is why in the mystical stage of religion we need to be cultivating silence and spending time each day in some form of contemplative practice. Contemplative practice is forms of prayer that allow us to be, to listen, to receive and to accept the gift that has already been given to us. It is prayer methods that help us relax into the reality of being loved. If we are finding ways to relax into the reality of being loved then we are claiming our belovedness and becoming a mystic.

### 2. WE ARE TAMING THE POWER OF OUR FALSE SELF

As well as a true self we also have a *false* self. Our false self is an acquired self, an idealised self. It is a self that is built around the expectations of others. Our false self was created by the childhood wound of conditional love. Because of this wound we look for love in things outside us, specifically in what we have, in what we do and in what other people think of us. Our false self finds its identity in *three* worth requirements: We need to *own* something, *do* something or *be* something to feel worthy of love.

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Our false self powerfully and subtly says to us: “You are what you have, you are what you do and you are what other people think of you.” This drives us to build our lives around what I like to call the A triangle: accumulation, achievement and approval. These three A’s are our false self’s programme for happiness. Early in life we buy into this programme supported, indeed seduced, by the culture around us. But the truth is, the three A’s cannot make us happy because they are all *external* sources of value. Our worth cannot be defined by external things. Accumulation, achievement and the approval of other people cannot fill the hole we have inside. Only unconditional love can. Sooner or later we have to realise and accept that we are not what we have, we are not what we do and we are not what other people think of us.

To tame the power of our false self is to let go of the control that accumulation, achievement and our need for human approval has over us. Needless to say this is a difficult and painful process. The false self was imbedded in us in childhood and it will not surrender easily. It will fight to remain centre stage. One of the major purposes of the mid-life crisis is to break the power of the false self. For many of us it takes not just one but a number of crises to tame the false self. Our false self is also weakened by our experiences of failing and falling. And once again contemplative practice is needed. Through our fidelity to contemplative practice, one identity is gradually being replaced by another. We move from external sources of value to an *internal* one, from defining ourselves by the three A’s to defining ourselves by our belovedness, from seeking love outside ourselves to finding it within ourselves. To use the language of St Paul, the old man is gradually being replaced by the new man. This is what is happening in the mystical stage of religion.

### 3. WE ARE EMBRACING OUR WOUNDS

We are all *wounded*. We are born into a wounded world and a wounded family. We also collect our own personal wounds as we grow up. Our wounds affect the way we experience ourselves, other people, the world in which we live and God. Our wounds have huge control over us; indeed they have the power to destroy us. So what can we do with them? I would like to suggest that we need to learn to *embrace* them. Embracing our wounds is a process; it is a process that involves *three* things: naming, claiming, taming.

It is said that if we can *name* our enemies we are half way toward defeating them. We need to begin by naming our wounds. To name our wounds we must first acknowledge and accept that

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we are wounded. This may not be easy. We do not like to admit that we are weak and vulnerable. The fact is we can't go on forever protecting ourselves behind a coat of armour. We have to allow our defences to come down. In naming our wounds it is helpful if we can be clear and precise. Finding this clarity may take time and patience, but it is worth the effort and the wait. There is a degree of freedom in being able to name our wounds in a way that we can truly own them.

Once we name our wounds we then need to *claim* them. They are my wounds. Yes, I probably did not cause my wounds, but they are mine and I have to take ownership of them. Taking responsibility for our wounds inevitably involves forgiveness. Sooner or later we have to forgive the people who wounded us. If we don't, we are likely to remain stuck. In this it is helpful to understand that the people who wounded us were wounded themselves and perhaps wounded deeply. No one is perfect. Everyone is weak. Failing and falling are part of the human condition. Forgiving the people who wounded us may not be easy, but it is necessary.

To fully embrace our wounds we then need to *tame* them. Here I am using the word tame very deliberately. It is my view that our wounds will not be healed fully in this life. We will not get rid of our wounds this side of death. For some reason God prefers to leave us carry our wounds. To embrace our wounds is to learn to live with them, and to live with them we need to tame them. Taming our wounds involves *two* things. The *first* has to do with feelings. We need to let ourselves experience the feelings associated with our wounds. This of course is painful, often very painful. Who wants to feel anger or sadness or shame or guilt or grief or anxiety or fear? These are some of the feelings that our wounds may awaken in us. To tame our wounds, we have to allow these feelings to surface. If we do, they will lose some of their power over us. If we don't, they will continue to control us unconsciously. It is true: "There is no gain without pain."

The *second* thing we need to do to tame our wounds is surrender. We need to surrender them to God. To hand our wounds over to God is to allow ourselves experience God in a new and personal way. It is to discover with St Paul that God's power working in us can do infinitely more than we can imagine. Richard Rohr believes that if we can allow our wounds to become sacred wounds then our story becomes a sacred story. To surrender our wounds to God is to allow them to become sacred wounds. God may not take away our wounds, but God will certainly help us find a way of living with them. God may leave our wounds to 'make' us stay dependent on him and to remind us that he is the only one who can satisfy

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the deeper longings in our hearts. Those in the mystical stage of religion know this.

### 4. WE ARE ACCEPTING THAT ALL IS GIFT

There is an objective reality to our human and spiritual lives. It is this: All is *gift*. Creation is gift. Salvation is gift. Our sanctification is gift. God's presence in the world is gift. God's relationship with us is gift. God's unconditional love for us is gift. Light, life and love are gifts. Faith, hope and charity are gifts. The spiritual life is God's work in us. Our transformation into the likeness of Jesus is the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The flow of everything is from God to us. Our fundamental stance before God is one of receptivity. The mystic is very aware of this.

To accept that all is gift is to come to God with empty hands. St Therese of Lisieux once said that she wanted to appear before God in death emptyhanded. In her early twenties she had come to realise that all is grace. This was great spiritual maturity for someone so young, proof that holiness is not determined by age. In the mystical stage of religion we are accepting that the spiritual life is not about requirements. We will not need our 'lists' of good deeds in the presence of God. The Father's love is gift, not achievement. For this reason we can identify with the experience of the prodigal son who returned to his father with empty hands to find his father waiting for him with open hands. In the mystical stage of religion, we have moved on from a requirements/rewards experience of faith. Requirements/rewards only keep us in the bondage of conditional love. The experience of God as unconditional love fills us with peace and gratitude. Yes gratitude. Perhaps the sign that we are accepting that all is gift is gratitude. We are grateful, we are saying thanks. We know it is truly right to give God thanks and praise.

### 5. WE ARE GROWING IN CONTEMPLATIVE AWARENESS

*Contemplative awareness* is our capacity to recognise the presence of God in all that is real. It is about seeing all things with the eyes of faith. God's presence is not just confined to the 'religious bits,' to what happens in church, to times of prayer, to the celebration of the sacraments. God's presence is revealed in our encounters with other people, in our relationships, in the inner stirring of our hearts, in art and music and nature, in our times of leisure, in our pain and struggles, in the many events of our daily lives. All these things and more are sources of God's revelation. They are, to quote the poet Patrick Kavanagh, "the window that looks inward to God."

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In the mystical stage of religion we are looking through the window of reality to find the reality of God. We are becoming more alert to the action of God, the movement of God, the work of God in all places and in all people. We are even expecting to find God in unexpected ways. Because of this, in the mystical stage of religion, we are integrating faith and life. Now faith and life are no longer separated like the parallel lines on a railway track that never meet. Instead, they are becoming one. To be able to say with St Teresa of Avila that God is everywhere is to have integrated faith and life. It is to know with St Paul that in him we live and move and have our being (see Acts 17:28).

### 6. WE ARE BECOMING MORE COMPASSIONATE

Jesus said, “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.” Many scripture scholars believe this simple statement is a summary of the Gospel. *Compassion* is the nature of God and God wants it to be our nature too. The fruit of prayer is compassion. Indeed, the test of prayer is compassion. Prayer and compassion are like twin sisters. They are inseparable. Compassion is certainly a sign and fruit of spiritual growth and development.

So what is compassion? It is a way of becoming involved in the lives of other people. This involvement isn't necessarily about doing things for others or fixing other people's problems. Our attempts at fixing other people's problems can sometimes be an exercise of power or a way of controlling those who need help. Compassion is being *present* to people. It is walking along side people. It is being there for others without pulling back in fear. In its purest form compassion is feeling with others, especially those who are struggling and suffering. Ultimately, it is about my capacity to enter into the life of another at the level of emotion where my heart knows the heart of the other. This is the literal meaning of the word compassion: with passion.

Compassion is also non-dualistic thinking. Non-dualistic thinking is inclusive and egalitarian. It doesn't create distinctions between people on the basis of class, religion, nationality, wealth, sexual orientation. It recognises that we are all equal, brothers and sisters to one another and children of the one God. Non-dualistic thinking sees the other as a gift rather than a threat. It accepts that no institution, religion or country has a monopoly on holiness, on goodness, on the truth. In answer to the question: Who is my neighbour? It replies: Everyone! Non-dualistic thinking acknowledges that there are many paths to God and that “We are all just walking each other home,” to quote Ram Dass.

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In the mystical stage of religion we are learning what compassion is really about and why it is so important. We are also realising that what helps us develop compassionate hearts is our experience of God's compassion. We know that God finds our weakness and vulnerability irresistible, that God is with us in our pain. Furthermore, because we know that God is compassionate with us, we are able to be compassionate with ourselves. There is one thing that can be said with confidence about the mystical stage of religion. It is filled with compassion; God's compassion for us, our compassion for ourselves, our compassion for others. It shouldn't surprise us, therefore, to know that all the great mystics throughout history were very compassionate people. They were simply channels of the life of God whose nature is compassion.

### CONCLUSION

I believe the six things I have identified in this article need to be happening at some level in the mystical of religion. I say happening because as I mentioned at the beginning we are always *in process*. It is clear that the mystical stage of religion is awakened and sustained by the experience of God as unconditional love. It changes the way we see God, ourselves, other people and the earth. And it allows us to 'taste' communion with the divine, a communion for which we long and for which we are made.

**Dreaming Big.** The young Pat Whitney delighted in reading *Buffalo Bill* at secondary school. This popular western adventure series by William F Cody (1864-1917), known as *penny dreadfuls*, was considered a respectable sort of delinquency. Though possessing it was forbidden, Pat was willing to take his chances but was nearly always caught. Author, visionary and founder of a missionary society, Pat Whitney, always had the courage to take a risk.

– GARY HOWLEY, *Revisiting the Vision of Fr Patrick J. Whitney*, (Dublin: Columba Books), 2021, p. 3.