

Mysticism in Worship

A Brief Paper for the 2005 Fall Convocation of Greenfield Group
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Moments at Worship Recalled

I stand amidst Benedictine monks and assorted others. It is twilight. A list of names is read for the Litany of All Saints. After every two or three names we respond in song. The notes of the music sound a plea. The names include the expected church fathers, and then the list broadens:

Oscar Romero....Be with us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer....Be with us.

Abraham Heschel....Be with us

Mohatama Ghandi....Be with us

Sojourner Truth and Steven Biko....Be with us.

Albert Einstein and Anne Frank....Be with us.

Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepherd....Be with us.

Brother Roger of Taize....Be with us.

I become accustomed to the constant repetition. I settle into its rhythm. The recitative seeps into my soul. Standing amidst a stream of time, a living memory, I am filled with wonder.

Sunday morning I stand at the front of a Unitarian Universalist church and without fanfare or instruction invite others to stand with me and join in a "body prayer." A single flute plays. I slowly move through the gestures: open palms, hand crossed over my chest, one hand outstretched, and another. We wait and receive, we hold close, we let go. And at the end we bow. Though the sanctuary holds several hundred people, including children, a quiet comes over the gathered. The restlessness is gone. Stillness has come upon us.

In the late afternoon a group gathers at the front of the sanctuary to celebrate communion. We sing, we pray, we hear a story of faith from one among us. Then the bread and wine are presented and blessed. The custom is to ask the name of the one beside you and to say, "Marta, the bread of life" and to pass the bread to them. And then, "Marta, the cup of compassion" and to pass the cup of wine to them. You are called by name and offered a time honored morsel of blessing and sustenance. I watch as each person, flawed and beautiful, has their moment of receiving. There is a joining of heaven and earth, of what is earthly and what is eternal.

How often do you have a mystical experience in worship? I ask myself and am surprised at my answer. More often than I at first thought.

Our Forebears

Henry Ware Jr. of Harvard fame defined mysticism as "the striving of the soul after God, the longing of the finite for communion with the Infinite." "Without it," he said, "there is, and there can be, no religion."

Mysticism involves the immediate, direct, and indeed personal experience of the Divine which albeit is more often than not defined in impersonal terms: God, Spirit, Ultimate, Ground of Being, Void, Nirvana, One.

Transcendentalists of the nineteenth century craved such spiritual experiences. Margaret Fuller's celebrated "heavenliest day of communion" occurred in October 1838 in "meditative woods" when "all the films seemed to drop from my existence."

Our Unitarian forebears exalted mysticism as the connecting thread of a universal religion. Octavius Frothingham claimed that mysticism was "peculiar to no sect of believers, to no church, to no religion; it is found equally among orthodox and heterodox, Protestants and Catholics, pagans and Christians, Greeks and Hindoos, the people of the Old World and the people of the New." A generation later, in 1880, James Freeman Clarke said the mystic "sees through the show of things to their center, becomes independent of time and space."

As Leigh Schmidt of Princeton University reminds us, Unitarians like Joseph Priestley and Ralph Waldo Emerson were attracted to mysticism but abhorred ritual practices. Henry Ware Jr. wanted a mysticism stripped of rituals, material symbols, sacramental hosts and bleeding bodies which he called "fetichism" of devotions aimed at "outward objects."

That wasn't the only source of hesitancy they brought to the topic of mysticism. In the introduction to his collected works, William Ellery Channing wrote in 1841:

In most religious systems, the tendency has been to seize exclusively on the idea of the Infinite, and to sacrifice to this the finite, the created, the human.... (But) we must believe in man's agency as truly as in the Divine, in his freedom as truly as in his dependence, in his individual being as truly as in the great doctrine of his living in God.

Otherwise Channing said, "Our religion is sublimated into mysticism and degraded into servility." In other words, Channing was afraid that too much mysticism robs us of our individual consciousness and turns our intellect to putty. Too much God and too much mysticism and we deny the power and grandeur of human nature. Too much God and too much mysticism, and we will deny our free will, our moral power, our human responsibility.

But Channing's writings are mixed. Five years earlier he had spoken at the dedication of the Unitarian Church in Newport Rhode Island in a discourse entitled "Christian Worship:"

Man's highest relations are not political, earthly, and human....
He has wants too deep, and powers and affections too large for the outward world. He comes from God. His closest connection is with God; and he can find life and peace only in the knowledge of his Creator.

All in all our liberal religious tradition comes to mysticism with both desire and some fear and prejudice. We want God but not too much God. We want Spirit but not too much Spirit. This desire as well as these fears and prejudices have shaped how we worship to this day.

Some Thoughts on the Mystical into Worship: Wonder, Sacrament and Silence

More than twenty years ago my “big” sister, also a life-long Unitarian Universalist, offered what still seems to me a comprehensive theory of worship. She said, “I go to church for two reasons: to feel a sense of wonder and to be called to my best self.” These may be the two central poles of Unitarian Universalist worship. Our worship has its mystical and ethical aims.

Abraham Heschel, Dorothee Soelle and others before them have said that the first step on the mystical way is wonder, awe, and amazement. We experience such amazement in the face of nature, history and beauty. Amazed, we are freed from trivialities. Amazed, we take nothing for granted and dwell amidst surprise and possibility. Without such overwhelming amazement, there can be no sense of union with the Holy.

In 1950 Sophia Lyon Fahs wrote, “we need to awaken our own sensitivity to the mysterious in the here and now.” To do so she suggests that we “practice concentrating our thoughts” on “common things and events until we sense and feel the mysterious in them.” Isn’t this one of the things that Christians engage in in every Eucharist? Or Jews at every Sabbath blessing over the candles and the loaves of challah? Isn’t the genius of any sacrament that it takes an ordinary act, a common thing and lifts it up that we might see and be reminded of the Holy both therein and beyond?

Paul Tillich, though I am only able to find this in a secondary source, once spoke of the Quaker truth and the Quaker mistake. The Quaker truth, he said, is that everything, seen through the eyes of faith, is sacramental. Nothing exists that does not reflect and communicate the glory of God. But if we do not have specific sacraments whose purpose is to make us aware of life’s sacredness, we might never perceive that all life is sacred. This, Tillich said, may be the Quaker mistake. Is it our mistake as well?

There are all sorts of sacramental objects and acts, ‘thin’ places where the division between what is transitory and earthly is pierced and permeated by what is Infinite and Eternal. The thin places will not be the same for everyone. What is important is having the eyes of faith to see and embrace the sacramental in the likes of bread, wine, water, oil, fruits and flowers of the earth, darkness and light.

Sacraments, as well as music, poetry and the visual arts, can illicit wonder in worship. But we need still more if our worship is to make room for the mystical, for a personal union with the Holy.

Mystics of all strips employ silence as arguably their most frequent and common practice. Abraham Heschel asked, “Is not listening to the pulse of wonder worth silence and abstinence from self-assertion?” Silence and stillness allow for an inner spaciousness and an opening for a Holy visitation. Knowing quiet we are more ready to receive the Word.

These days I am experiencing worship more as a participant and less as a leader. Listening to a colleague’s Sunday sermon recently highlighted for me the possibility of holding the sermon as a

prelude to one's own thoughts. This is much the way I think of a spoken prayer before the silence; it is the prelude to our personal prayers. The words of a sermon, like the words of the prayer, are there to set the stage for the other to do their own praying or reflecting, to do their own opening to a new Word. Sitting in the pew I wonder what it would be like to end sermons with a few minutes of silence, before rushing on to the hymn, the benediction, and the chit chat of coffee hour and the receiving line? This might give me the time, the space, the chance to sit with what the Spirit might be offering me, calling me to. Instead of the preacher, the Spirit might have the chance to have the final word.

Mysticism in Church

In The Color Purple, Alice Walker has Shug tells Celie where not to go looking for mystical experiences:

Tell the truth, have you ever found God in a church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to *share* God, not find God.

There is some truth in these words. Worship is not necessarily a place to find God but to share what we have known of God, and in that sharing go forth more able to recognize the Holy in our midst. If this is the case, worship is about cultivating a taste for the Holy that will be found beyond the church doors. But to cultivate a taste, one must actually taste.

Again Channing calls out from the church in Newport, “The great end for which you are to worship here is, that you may worship everywhere. You are to feel God’s presence here, that it may be felt wherever you go, and whatever you do.”

RESOURCES

William Ellery Channing, “Introductory Remarks” and “Christian Worship, Discourse at the Dedication of the Unitarian Congregational Church, Newport, Rhode Island, July 27, 1836” in The Works of William Ellery Channing (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1891)

Sophia Lyon Fahs, “The Beginnings of Mysticism in Children’s Growth,” *Religious Education*, May/June 1950

Abraham Heschel, The Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism (New York: Crossroad, 1987)

Leigh Eric Schmidt, “The Making of Modern Mysticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, June 2003

Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry, Mysticism and Resistance*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2001)