

## MYSTICISM AND SOCIAL ACTION

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Of course mysticism is going to lead to social action!

For one thing the mystic experience is democratic in nature – it is available to everyone and is not just the experience of an elite.

Mystics from all traditions look beyond dogma, scripture, and the authority of their faith community for a direct experience of The Holy. For the mystic the final authority is her/his own experience (reinforced by their mystical community). This will always put them at odds with ecclesiastical or political establishments.

Mystics of all traditions emphasize awakening to reality, the truth of the spirit, the willingness to critique the injustices of their society, and the capacity for human transformation – all of which are good motivations for doing social justice work.

Andrew Harvey in his book The Essential Mystics writes, “The mystic journey is taken on behalf of all humanity.” The authentic mystic journey is not an act of selfishness or withdrawal from the world; rather the mystic journey leads to new possibilities for the human community.

Harvey reminds us that the Old Testament prophets were mystics who dared to criticize the injustices in their society and envisioned new ways of achieving right relationship and shared power. (p.88)

He also describes Christianity as the way of “love in action.” He writes,

“Christ offers his whole being and life as a sacrifice of the most urgent and focused service to all beings and implicitly demands of anyone who loves him the same passion of humble attention and self donation. Everything is asked and everything must be given if justice is to be done; the facts of social, political and economic oppression and of the deformity of all kinds of power, including religious power have to be seen without any consolation; the rigor of real transformation into love has to be endured, suffering in all its subtle and horribly obvious aspects has to be accepted, embraced, and transformed. “(p. 170)

Carie J. Johnsen-Killiam in her article "The Mystical Genealogy within Unitarian Universalism" refers back to the activist inclinations of our Transcendentalist mystic forbearers.

Johnsen-Killiam refers to Bronson Alcott's essay on "Mysticism." In this essay Alcott describes love, thought, and action to be the manifestations of the spirit when he writes,"

Love designs, thought sketches, action sculptures the works of the spirit. Love is divine, conceiving, creating, and completing all things. Love is the Genius of the Spirit. (p. 54)

This is the sensibility that compelled the transcendentalists to engage in reform movements of all kinds.

In her book ,The Silent Cry, Dorothee Soelle describes for us what a mystic journey might look like today using three key terms – be amazed, let go, and resist.

### BE AMAZED

The first step on the contemporary mystic journey that Soelle describes is to be amazed.

Following Mathew Fox she values the original blessing of creation, rather than original sin. (P. 88)

To be amazed is to experience God (mysticism) and not simply have knowledge of God (theology).

To be amazed is to experience God as the source of life and love.

To be amazed is to be aware of the beauty and wonder of the world.

To be amazed is to feel a deep sense of connection with creation, to cherish the diversity of life, and to experience the unity of all parts of creation.

To be amazed is to praise God and creation and to live with enthusiasm for the gift of life. Indeed, the history of mysticism is the history of the love of God. ((p.2)

### LET GO:

The second step on the mystic journey is to let go.

Here Soelle refers to the alienation that we feel – the experience of not feeling at home with the oppression, destruction, and violence of our world. This is what empowers mystics to say NO to the world as it currently exists and to imagine other possibilities.

Soelle reminds us that paradoxically, “The more profound the amazed blissfulness of the sunder warumbe (the utter absence of any why or wherefore)..... the darker the night of the soul. “ (p. 91) Here Soelle contrasts the power of the mystical experience of the unity of life with all the principalities and powers that diminish life, oppress people, and destroy the environment in our day and time.

Soelle’s list of sins is long: patriarchal religion, hierarchy, dominance, globalization, racism, consumerism, the mercantile spirit, unbridled individualism, egoism, possessiveness, and violence.

She suggests ways to let go that can counter these ills including:

- Reject consumerism; simplify our life styles.
- Step away from worldly success.
- Change people through dialogue and persuasion.
- Commit to non-violence and civil disobedience.

## RESISTANCE

Taking the first two steps empowers us to take the third step which is to resist the principalities and powers of our time.

Soelle asks, “How do we foster the inner life of being one with everything and resist the machine of death?” (p.5)

For mystical consciousness it is essential that everything internal become external and made visible in the world. (p.13)

Following Meister Eckhart, Soelle reminds us that “all authentic deeds are those that emulate the original act of creation. They are deeds that spring from life and love. (p.61)

The orientation toward praxis that manifests itself in ones life style, and how one relates to central social issues, belongs to the heart of the mystical going outside oneself. (p. 50)

Hers is a “mysticism of wide eyes.” We don’t close our eyes to evil and suffering in the world. We don’t withdraw from the world. Rather we enter with compassion the suffering of the world. Soelle writes,

“John of the Cross says that ‘the suffering for the neighbor grows the more as the soul unites itself through love with God.’ This kind of suffering is not

imposed, as in the manner of illness, nor is it chosen, as in extreme ecstasy. It arises from a relationship to the world that is not immersed in the I alone. Instead, in its anguish about unliberated life, it is drawn into suffering, which is – in terms of the hardly exhaustible double meaning of the word – from the passion of the impassioned heart into the passion of the road of suffering and pain. It is not the self-imposed form of ascetic dolorous suffering that is the voluntary element here but the risk contained in every partiality for the victims of history and every commitment to the cause of the losers. “ (p.140)

By entering suffering we deepen our relations with our sisters and brothers, we live in the passion of the suffering Christ, and we may even be transformed by God. (p.138)

Soelle encourages us to align ourselves with the poor and oppressed. Soelle would like us to go beyond the current emphasis of a hermeneutic of suspicion which is fashionable in contemporary theology. She calls us to adopt “the hermeneutic of hunger” that forms the basis of liberation theology. For Soelle this is the mysticism that comes from the life experience of the poor and oppressed.

Soelle reminds us we can't sustain our resistance as solitary individualists. We need the strength of the mystic communities of resistance to sustain us. Drawing upon the examples of Hasidic communities at the end of the 1700s, the Beguines in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century, and the Quakers in more recent times she shows how these communities dealt with the critical issues of power and right relationship both within their communities and in the larger society as well.

At the heart of the mystic vision are the issues of power and right relationships. Mystical language is a language of unity and not of dominance. (p.63) And, mysticism is an anti-authoritarian religion (p. 36) The goal of the mystic is to live with "Sacred Power." Soelle writes,

“If there really is love, it has to meet two conditions. It has to bring about a kind of mutuality in which the unknowability of the known is preserved, the otherness of the other. Only in this way can love impart participation in sacred power, in the shared power of the holy. This power is called “holy” because its nature is not to rule over others or to exercise domination that is sustained by dominion. It is “holy” because it is in essence a sharing of power, and empowerment in which everyone has a share in the power of life.” (p.128)

Soelle invites us to be amazed – to let go- and to resist – three simple ideas – but enough to experience the Holy and maybe change the world.

