The background is a vibrant, abstract composition of various colors including shades of orange, yellow, green, blue, and pink, with a textured, painterly appearance. A large, solid blue circle is positioned in the lower-left quadrant. Inside this circle, the text "The Politics of MYSTICISM" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font. Below the text is a white geometric symbol consisting of three nested L-shaped lines that form a square-like shape with an open corner.

**The Politics of
MYSTICISM**



THE POLITICS OF MYSTICISM



Perhaps the most problematic issue confronting transpersonalists is the veracity of inner experiences. For many involved in new religious groups mystical encounters, like near-death and out-of-body excursions, offer evidence of their respective guru's rightful position or succession. This has been especially acute in several Sant Mat related groups, particularly Kirpal Singh's Ruhani Satsang, where mastership disputes are often resolved by resorting to one's inner meditation experiences. But there is a rub in all this that for the most part lies uninspected by those newly initiated.

No doubt a religious devotee may use such experiences as proof for the authenticity of his/her guru or group, but what he/she fails to realize is that there are thousands, if not millions, of people who also claim personal revelations which convince them of the truthfulness of their chosen path. Even Elvis has hundreds of devotees who reported seeing his radiant form at the end of a long dark tunnel when they underwent a near-death experience. So if someone in Memphis can see Elvis in their meditation, are we then supposed to believe in the spiritual mastership of Elvis? Don't get me wrong, I am the first to admit that the King had some great songs during his career, but just because a crew of devoted fans have glimpses of him in the alleged after-life does not constitute documented proof of his spiritual attainment.

I have met scores of New Agers, each initiated by some great guru, who claim to have extraordinary experiences. So what? People can be deceived (like, for instance, Arran Stephens who admitted that he was duped on the inner regions by his experiences with Sant Ajaib Singh). So this issue of inner experiences as proof of a guru's status raises a very important epistemological question: how do we know that what we perceive in mystical practices is truthful or accurate? Now we may come up with any host of supporting evidences, but the fact remains that what one experiences individually in the privacy of meditation is circumscribed by exactly that same feature: private, personal experience.

What we convey in writing, or what we convey on the telephone, or what we convey by conversation face to face is not evidence of our inner experiences on the spiritual planes, but merely testimony which one can either believe or disbelieve. The naive seeker may accept or reject it as suggestive of truth, but such testimony in itself adds zip to the question of empirical confirmation. Look at the initiates of Thakar Singh or John-Roger Hinkins, each of whom have the same story to tell and it is precisely like their rival counterparts: "I had a mystical experience which convinced me beyond a reasonable doubt that my guru is genuine." The net result is not some universal mystical agreement ("Yes, we do agree that Elvis is the transcendental King"), but rather a plethora of competing accounts, each which patently contradict the other.

What is the primary difference between a fundamentalist Christian and a mystically inclined yogi, especially when it comes to evaluating their ultimate truth claims? Both think they have uncovered the truth. The former by the revealing "Word" of the Bible; the latter by the manifesting inner "Word" of the higher regions. Yet, in both cases, the neophyte is subject to doubt, to skepticism, to deception, since revelations of truth (both inner and outer) are manifold. The Muslims have their Koran; the Sikhs have their Guru Granth Sahib; and the Christians have their Bible. And, for the mystics, yogis, and sages who turn inward what do we find? The Hare Krsnas' see Lord Krishna; the Saivites see Lord Shiva; and Ruhani Satsangis (depending upon your affiliation) see Sant Rajinder Singh, or Sant Baljit Singh, or Sant Sadhu Ram

But, as the argument goes, the devoted mystic will say that his or her experiences are authentic (because of the utter certainty of the encounter) and the experiences of others, especially if they belong to a rival group which splintered off after a succession dispute, are misguided, secondary, or illusory. So what we actually have in effect here in terms of truth claims is not essentially different than that of a fundamentalist. The mystic is right by virtue of his/her inner attainment and everybody else is wrong (no matter how politely we may gloss over it: karma or chance?) because he/she happened to get the right guru and the right path (and by right we mean "highest").

But notice how the mystic is not calling into question or doubt his/her own truth claims. For example, one rarely finds a completely agnostic posture among disciples about the relative status of his/her guru. Why not? Because just like the fundamentalist he or she is not trained to severely doubt interior revelations of truth, primarily because they appear so real when they occur. It is one thing to state that my inner experiences have convinced me that I am on the right track; quite another to then make judgments on the veracity of other meditators' experiences. Yet even here the person most vulnerable to deception is our self. Paradoxically, the most certain and overwhelming an inner experience appears to be the less likely we are to look for more mundane causations. In other words, the very topography of a mystical encounter tends to blind one from looking for alternative explanations for its originations. Here the Indian word *maya* is, surprisingly, apt: "that which betrays its real origin."

To strike a sociological note, it becomes fairly apparent that culture plays a significant role in the ultimate interpretations of inner experiences. What at first glance appears to be a simple, sweet path to enlightenment, turns out to be on closer inspection a political contest over religious claims--claims, I should add, that have been transformed by the cultural landscape of when and where they take place. We may wish that mysticism was devoid of culture, or personal bias, or religious prejudice, but it is almost wholly entrenched in it.

Why? Because we never apprehend inner lights and sounds and beings divorced of their interpretative network. In other words, our socially conditioned minds are always flavoring, always transforming, always contextualizing whatever we perceive, whether those sights be inner or outer. And it is exactly when my experiences are personal and internal that I am most subject to error. Why? Because we have yet to discern a normative corrective for mystical encounters. To be sure we have templates to gauge inner experiences, their relative efficacy and so on, but since most individuals have no mastery of experiencing OBE's and NDE's we are subject to tremendous imprecision and tremendous speculation. Yet do we admit to this impasse? Do we acknowledge our immaturity in the so-called spiritual arena?

There is something fundamentally skewed when religious converts (of any persuasion and of any methodological bent) begin to believe that they have cornered the market on truth. As one wise saying puts it, "If there really is a God, He/She may find atheism to be less of an insult than religion." The point is obvious: what we know the least about is the very thing we make absolute statements on. Strange, but true. Take Jesus Christ, as a prime, if controversial, example. What do we really know about him? Not very much. Depending on your perspective and the sources that you cite, Jesus emerges as the only begotten Son of God, a Jewish mystic with Gnostic leanings, or a clever, but ultimately misguided magician. The only thing that is absolutely certain about Jesus, at least historically speaking, is that we know less about him than we think. Indeed, the real truth about Jesus' existence is forever buried in the recesses of time.

And yet we have some one billion plus people on this planet right now who more or less believe that if you don't accept the truth claims of Jesus Christ (as provided in certain books that themselves are the result of questionable political processes) you will end up in eternal hell. All of this and we still don't know what he even looked like and what he did for some fifteen years in his teens and early twenties? Couple this with the contradictory and entirely insufficient biographical details contained in the gospels which are the major sources for Jesus' life and you wonder how a Christian can be so assured in their faith. Put bluntly, you wouldn't allow your son or daughter to marry a prospective suitor if the only information you had on them was equal to what we know about Jesus. But there are millions of us who seriously think that we have to make a lifetime, nay eternal, commitment to a person we have never met and know less about than our next door neighbor.

When it comes to religion and its claims, whether they are based on revealed texts or interior visions, the one common denominator is that we somehow have to check our brains in at the door before entering into the tabernacle of ultimate truth. Yet it is exactly that brain, that three pounds of wonder tissue or glorious meat, as Patricia Churchland so succinctly puts it, that has allowed us to ponder life's ultimate questions. It is that very brain which has led us to pray, to read, to meditate. It is

also that very brain which can misinterpret exterior stimuli as well as internal neural firing. My hunch is that before we make any ultimate claims for truth, we understand that we are constantly subject to error.


So the mystic may potentially be better off than the mere believer, who only reads but never actually engages in technical spiritual practices, because he or she gets firsthand experiences of alternate realms of consciousness not merely menu descriptions of them. But this does not mean that the mystic has experienced the "truth" in all its purity and that the mystic somehow "knows" the efficacy of other spiritual teachers or paths. No, what the mystic does in fact know is rather quite simple: a different state of consciousness which he or she interprets according to his/her cultural or religious background. On that score, I do think that mystics are on the right track; it is better to experiment than simply speculate. Yet, the results of those experiments are subject to numerous interpretations, some of which may be better than others. Since we are still at such a preliminary level in our investigation of states of consciousness beyond the waking-rational level, it seems to me to be a much wiser course for us to adopt a stance of honest humility and openness than succumb prematurely to absolute statements or theorizing which in the end cause much more harm than good.

We may want to believe that our chosen (or, in most cases, assigned) religion is the only true path, or that our personal mystical encounters are reflections of universal truth, but when we do so we are only revealing how exquisitely ignorant we really are. It seems to me that the more we acknowledge that exquisite ignorance, instead of suppressing or outright denying it, the better off we will be. And just maybe, like our wise travelers before us (Socrates, Lao Tzu, Nicholas of Cusa), we will realize that learned ignorance is the beginning of wisdom and the cornerstone of truth.

NOTES

1. If I might interject a personal note, being taught in Catholic schools for some twelve years and teaching religion in their high schools for another five has its own peculiar advantages, especially when it comes to the topic of assessing leaders like Jesus Christ. For one, I was brought up with a clear, univocal, and dogmatic interpretation of his life teachings. No confusion, no room for debate--in sum, Jesus was the Son of God, the axis point of human history, and the ultimate meaning of the universe. The only drawback to a strict Catholic education, though, is that when you begin to ask critical questions about the origins of your religion, you run into deep trouble. I remember vividly my first run-in. When I asked Father Costello, my freshman religion instructor, if Tibetan Buddhists could go to heaven, he unhesitatingly replied, "No, only baptized Christians can enter the Kingdom." Although I was only fourteen years old at the time, I just couldn't swallow the good Father's answer nor the convoluted logic he invoked to support it. "You mean to suggest that God plays geographical favorites?" Or so my reasoning went, but to no avail. I ended up getting reprimanded in front of the class for being out of line and disrespectful. Needless to say, my doubts about the efficacy of Catholic dogma grew exponentially after this incident.





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