

# MYSTICISM

## IN THE EVOLUTION OF CULTURES

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One of the costs today's humans have had to bear as a result of the all-too-fast technological development which followed on from the scientific and industrial revolutions is the inexorable loss of our links with the earth and more importantly alienation from our spiritual source.

To most of us, and perhaps in every age, progress is looked upon as synonymous with the improvement of material conditions. A civilization which can produce laser eye surgery, space travelers, super railways, and atomic fusion is generally regarded as being advanced. But the enlightened few of every period in history have always recognized that true civilization is something more than material development, and that "something" is spiritualization. They have recognized that material advancements are only instruments for providing the leisure and opportunity for the development of the spirit. The nearer the human race approaches to the Central Spirit of the universe, to the Cosmic, the further it will have progressed.

During the rise of materialism, many of the world's cultures deeply repressed or even denied the organic processes that link humans with nature; these processes are birth, reproduction, and death. Simultaneously, the spiritual awareness that once provided humanity with a sense of meaningful belonging to the cosmos was replaced by disbelief in a Cosmic force, or superficial religious activities of decreasing vitality and relevance. Happily, Rosicrucians have maintained their interest in a positive relationship with the Cosmic and are striving to be practical and constructive in offering something to the world that will assist each and every human to advance this spiritual quest. But, you ask, by what mechanism can humanity achieve this goal of advancement?

The mechanism that advances civilization towards spirituality is mysticism, of which we Rosicrucians are probably all practitioners. And there are suggestions that outside the Order an unprecedented renaissance of interest in the psychology of mysticism and the spiritual inter-relationships that exist between all beings in the universe are developing among more and more individuals.

So, what is mysticism and what are its origins? The non-theological use of the word "mystical" in English, meaning "a hidden or secret thing" dates from about 1300 CE and arrives in English from Anglo-French where it is *misterie* (O.Fr. *mistere*). It came into French from the Latin *mysterium*, but its origin was from the Greek *mysterion* meaning "secret rite or doctrine," but of course, mysticism is itself much older than

this label for it. It is clear that mysticism implies a relationship to mystery.

Many philosophers refer to mysticism as being either a religious tendency and desire of the human soul towards an intimate union with the Divinity, or as a system growing out of such a tendency and desire. These contentions assume that the so-called Divinity, about which they speak, is the absolute and ultimate state of existence. This may or may not be so, but, are mysticism and religion inextricably related? I think not. Mystical contemplation and spiritual expression can take place both inside and outside the realm of religious belief and religious dogma.

Usually a mystical experience is filled with intense feelings and may involve a dialogue with or a direct encounter with ultimate reality; what we call the “Cosmic.” The “mystery” here is defining the identity of the something or someone greater than human comprehension that has been encountered during the mystical exercise. In the West, it is only in the last 2,000 years or so that mystical experience has come to mean a direct experience of the divine; and since, in theory at least, Christianity is the religion of love, the Christian “mystical” experience is spoken of as a “spiritual marriage.” For myself, I believe that a successful mystical experience may depend less on the particulars of the given occurrence than on what happens because of it.

Mystical experiences are shaped by culture and tradition. Accounts of their experiences provided by mystics are inevitably influenced by the culture in which they live and by their professed religious tradition. In the first case it is because language and linguistic references and expressions are determined by culture

and in the second instance it is because most religions contain the language that is most called upon when talking of the ultimate entity or the infinite. In fact, as we have seen, it is well-nigh impossible to examine mysticism in popular writings without also encountering religion, so intertwined have the two become since the advent of organized religion in the world. So Western mystics rarely claim that their experience dissolved them into the being of ultimate reality because Western theism insists that human beings never literally become God, or the divine. On the other hand Eastern mystics often describe the ultimate state of their spiritual experience as involving complete physical and sensory union with what we might call “Cosmic Consciousness.”

All mystical experiences, therefore, vary somewhat. Each is unique, but the uniqueness does not diminish or negate the claim for transcendence or touching ultimate reality despite the comment that the mystical experience itself is in part a function of what the mystic thinks can happen. Many mystics say that speech breaks down and is inadequate to describe their state, that silence is more appropriate, and that even silence is not adequate. This dimension of the mystical experience, although ultimately inseparable from the culture and personality of each mystic, transcends or rises above cultures, and applies to Christians as much as to Aboriginal people. And here lies a difficulty.

What prehistoric humans thought can never be known with certainty, because they did not write it down. The materials that they left behind them, like tools, weapons, works of art, burials, and the rest, can be interpreted in many ways, but even then we may not arrive at the actual interpretation.

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At best, material objects comprise a fragmentary record of the many different human groups who have lived in a variety of physical environments over a period of time far longer than that of recorded history. And even after written records begin to appear, because describing spiritual ecstasy is so difficult we have few documents that can tell us what previous cultures and civilizations thought about this activity.

However, some deductions about what our ancestors thought about life and death, the two major concerns they had as we ourselves have, can perhaps be drawn from the burial practices and tools of a subgroup of humans known as Neanderthals. These folk buried their dead with care, indicating their affection for the deceased. They included food and equipment in the graves which suggests they had a belief in an afterworld of some kind, in which the dead were not entirely cut off from the living. It also implies that they understood one factor which distinguishes humans from other animals; the knowledge of their own inevitable death. This remains the basis of one of the great mysteries of life. And thus, like we do, they understood that time passes and results in death and then ... ?

In turn, a sense of time implies the concept of order, of events following one another in succession, suggesting that Neanderthals understood the pattern of birth, life, and death that underlies human existence—that we are born, live for a time, and then die. They must have observed that the same cycle is true of plants and of animals. Perhaps it was this understanding that brought these early humans to the conclusion that behind the order of nature lay something beyond and above the plants, the animals, and even above themselves. After all, the task of the shaman, the person who was perhaps more perceptive or spiritually inclined than others in their group, was to attempt to make contact with that supernatural something that lay beyond human knowledge. We might imagine

that these early humans conceived of the supernatural “something” as a super-human that was in control of the order of nature.

Evidence of some sort of religio-magical cult, dating from about 100,000 BCE, has been found in caves in the European Alps where the skulls of bears had been placed on stone slabs in what looks like a ceremonious arrangement. Firstly, this action suggests that these relics were set apart from the mundane and were considered special in some way; and secondly, it indicates that the cave itself may have been thought to be a sacred place. Does the selection of skulls for this arrangement demonstrate that they thought a creature’s head contained the essence of its being? Certainly the intention of the rituals of later bear-hunting peoples was to appease some supernatural power for the killing of a bear, to make sure that there would be no decline in the supply of bears for hunting. Thus, we discover that the idea that an animating essence or spirit inhabits all aspects of Nature. The idea that every hill or stream or tree or living thing has a soul is one of the oldest of human beliefs.

People with limited control over their environment are likely to have tried to establish some kind of relationship with their own ancestors, from whom they have inherited such knowledge of the workings of nature as they possess. Their reason for this contact with their ancestors would most likely be to try to gain some control over the powers that give order to Nature. They needed to ensure that food supplies were maintained, that their animals were fruitful, and that children were born. No doubt, they also needed to act in some way to appease Nature which sometimes disastrously fails to provide the necessities.

In the Upper Paleolithic period (between about 30,000 to 10,000 BCE), after the arrival on the scene of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, as we like to call ourselves, burials become more elaborate and ceremonious, and there is strong evidence of the people’s concern for fertility in the “Venus figures,” small



Venus figure.

figurines of women, some highly stylized and others comparatively realistic, found in a number of archaeological contexts across Europe. The swollen pregnant abdomens of many of these figures and their blank, featureless heads suggest that they were not meant to portray particular women but a more abstract idea of “woman” in general, and especially woman in her role of mother. They may have been worn by women as amulets to ensure fruitfulness and they may have represented a Great Mother, the source of all life.

The Upper Palaeolithic is also the time when the magnificent cave art of Europe was produced. If the purpose of this art included a desire to promote fertility amongst the animal species portrayed as well as to assist hunting, then we might conclude that the society in which the artists lived, believed in a supernatural order of reality that humans must try to influence in order that they and their quarry are to eat, live, and procreate.

Perhaps this also implies that these people had ideas of magical symbolism in which a real state of affairs can be influenced in some way through mimicry and simulated situations.

Neanderthals did not wear ornaments, so far as is known, but the later Palaeolithic peoples did. They made necklaces of animals’ teeth or cowrie shells, for instance, and carved bracelets from mammoths’ tusks. It seems likely that ornaments contained an ingredient of magic, as they have tended to do ever since. The teeth may have carried with them the qualities of the animals from which they came, and in many times and many cultures the cowrie shell has been an emblem of the feminine and fertility.

The so-called “Neolithic revolution,” which saw the gradual development of cultivating crops and breeding animals, instead of gathering and hunting, originated in Asia in the ninth millennium BCE or earlier, and spread over most of Europe by about 3500 BCE. Our picture now becomes, if anything, even more obscure than before and the course of the transition from what is known of the Palaeolithic to the religions of societies with written records is not at all clear.

It seems evident that as agriculture, horticulture, and animal husbandry are gradually established during the Neolithic period, the annual cycle of Nature becomes a dominating factor in human life and a focus of religious and magical attention. Unlike the aggressive hunter, the passive farmer relies more on the slow workings of forces which are still largely beyond human control. Hunting’s perspectives are relatively







short-term and farming's are relatively long. The sense of an order behind Nature, of human dependence on it, and of the perils of disorder in the shape of drought, famine, destructive storms, pestilence, may have been strengthened by the longer perspective of farming communities. There are scattered pieces of evidence confirming that agricultural people worshipped fertility deities. Seedtime and harvest were the two great occasions of the year, and likely to be celebrated with festivals and rites intended to ensure a good crop. And it appears that undertaking ceremonies and performing rituals that would ensure fruitfulness were among the basic concerns of prehistoric humans, and probably represent humanity's earliest religious ceremonies.

The sky also becomes important, because sun, rain, and wind affect the growth of crops and because the calendar, which successful agriculture demands, is worked out by the reference to events occurring in the sky. (Reverence for the sky and its forces may easily have existed long before, though there is no evidence of sky worship in the Paleolithic.) But as we will see, the new emphasis on the sky will bring significant changes to the world.

Most Neolithic societies buried their dead with greater pomp and circumstance

than previously, especially those individuals who had been powerful in life. Sometimes, as in megalithic burials in Europe, or pyramid burials in ancient Egypt, constructing the graves involved immense and extravagant toil implying a deep respect for the powers of the dead personage and probably the belief that they influenced the growth of crops from the earth in which they lay buried. Representations of the mother goddess are often found in burying places and she seems clearly connected with the earth.

Thus humanity arrived at a point where they realized that we are and always remain part of a universe. It is a living universe and is animated with what I will call Spirit, and that Spirit lies at the core of existence in this universe. It is a dynamic force which permeates the universe from its center to its circumference. Each of us has it in ourselves and by it we are being continually acted upon. It burns within us, and we are bathed by its energy. But there are times when this force is peculiarly insistent and urgent within us. And there are times when it presses upon us with urgency from without. And there are rare occasions when the urge from within and the pressure from without meet and correspond. Then we have the ecstasy of mystical experience in its fullness as an

interaction or connection is established between the individual self and the universal whole and during which the self enters into a new state of being. The most we can guess about what mystical practitioners were enacting or thinking at this point in prehistory is deduced from enigmatic paintings made by the artists of the time in caves and in secluded caverns.

As people began to master new techniques in their material lives, inventions and discoveries were fitted into a religio-magical context, but the people who made these discoveries recorded precious little about their spiritual lives. The discovery of yeast, for example, made it possible to bake bread and brew beer, commodities which both had a long history of symbolic connections with the deities and the otherworld. The rise of metallurgy with the development of working in copper, bronze, and iron gave the smith the uncanny powers of one who was as much magician as craftsman. The seasonal progression of the agricultural cycles was still disrupted by climatic variability, which less sophisticated people put down to supernatural interference. Although we have some evidence of ceremonies and rituals whose aim was to appease wrathful deities, we know nothing of the spiritual quests of individuals during these chaotic ages.

The advance of towns, states, and armies in central Europe, with their male dynasties and priesthoods, tended to diminish the earthly Great Mother's status in favor of male gods of the sky who came to dominate the civilizations of the ancient world. Egyptian, Greek, and Roman stories told of the exploits of the sky-dwelling gods as they created the universe, made humanity, established order, and put down disorder. In far Western Europe the invasions and conquests of warrior peoples, whose deities were gods of the sky, also lessened the influence of the Great Mother.

Although we have little information

regarding the attitude of peasants and laborers in ancient Egypt towards mysticism, the fact that they collected many prayers and invocations to be recited over the deceased in his or her coffin or even by the entombed deceased demonstrates that some of the presumed results of mystical activity were certainly within their understanding.

There is little Mysticism in the earliest schools of Greek philosophy, but it becomes important by the time of the philosophical system of Plato. It is especially evident in his theory of the world of ideas, of the origin of the world soul and the human soul, and in his doctrine of recollection and intuition. The Alexandrian Jew named Philo, who lived between 30 BCE and 50 BCE, taught that people, by freeing themselves from matter and receiving illumination from the divine, may reach a mystical, ecstatic, or prophetic state in which they become absorbed into Divinity. But the most systematic attempt at formulating a philosophical system of a mystical character was that by the Neoplatonic School of Alexandria, especially that of Plotinus, arguably the greatest philosopher-mystic the world has ever known, who lived between 205 and 270 CE.

In his *Enneads*, Plotinus sets out a system which has as its central idea the concept that there exists a process of ceaseless emanation and out-flowing from the One, the Absolute. He illustrates this concept using metaphors such as the radiation of heat from fire, of cold from snow, fragrance from a flower, or light from the Sun. This theme leads him to the maxim that "good diffuses itself" (*bonum diffusivum sui*). He concludes that entities that have achieved perfection of their own being do not keep that perfection to themselves, but spread it out by generating an external image of their internal activity. The ultimate goal of human life and of philosophy is to realize the mystical return of the soul to the Divine. Freeing itself from the sensuous world by



purification, the human soul ascends by successive steps through the various degrees of the metaphysical order, until it unites itself in communion with the One. Now, I am sure that you recognize some of our present-day Rosicrucian principles in there.



*Great Chain of Being* by Robert Fludd (1617).

It was Plotinus who gave us the image of the Great Chain, used in later times by our own Rosicrucian alchemists and theorists to draw symbolic spherical diagrams of up to twelve concentric spheres representing: matter, life, sensation, perception, impulse, images, concepts, logical faculties, creative reason, world soul, nous, and the One.

The development of a particularly masculine outlook in cultures occurred over long stretches of time and the details of its advance across the settled world are largely unknown, but there was inexorable continuity in its spread. Admittedly, the Earth Mother of prehistory, in her various local incarnations, did become the ancestress of goddesses of later societies, but it seems that her times were past. It is worth observing that although her world had been uncertain, the new era of the masculine sky gods was no more settled.

Essentially mysticism brought to

the world religion, but despite perhaps being the carrier of mystical principle and methods, mysticism is not religion, nor as I have already mentioned is it necessarily religious. Mysticism belongs to the core of most religions and many commenced after their founder experienced a powerful and immediate mediate contact with the spiritual essence, their godhead. However, a lesser number of religions were prepared to allow their adherents to establish this kind of contact with the Cosmic for themselves, but rather kept this task firmly in the hands of a priesthood or the appointed leaders.

The Cosmic is also commonly called the One, and you and I are in some sense that One. This means that the inmost self of humans is identical with the Absolute, with the unchanging power against which the whole changing universe must be seen. Thus, one lives not only with one's own life but also with the life of the whole universe. This universal life is founded in a changeless Being which is at the same time one's own eternity. It was this understanding which made it possible for the poet Tennyson to say that death was "an almost laughable impossibility."

These latter are some of the ideas that we have inherited from those cultures that have proceeded through history before us. We carry their heritage. Some of their ideas and concepts have been discarded as humans came to new understandings of how the many parts of this complex Universe fit together. Some ideas and concepts remain relatively unchanged. As Rosicrucians we recognize that the final goal of all mystical experience is connection with that divine infinity which lies beyond matter and mind, but which can transform them. The approach to this ultimate state is through the power of discriminating thought and purified emotions and, as Henry More, one of the Cambridge Platonists, stressed: "God reserves His choicest secrets for the purest minds."