

## The Incoherence of Neomysticism

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### What is Mysticism?

The idea that there is a religious phenomena called mysticism, practiced in almost all major religions, is a decidedly modern concept, growing out of specific historical circumstances and philosophical assumptions found in the West. Bernard McGinn, a leading scholar of Christian mysticism, insists that “no mystic (at least before the [twentieth] century) believed in or practiced ‘mysticism.’ They believed in and practiced Christianity (or Judaism, or Islam, or Hinduism [or Buddhism]), that is, religions that contained mystical elements as parts of a wider historical whole.”<sup>1</sup> The idea that certain religious practices and beliefs are “mystical” is, in fact, the imposition of a Western Christian religious category on non-Christian religions. Western scholars have projected their conception of mysticism indefinitely through time and space to eventually encompass most forms of religion.

Mysticism is a notoriously difficult thing to define. Which means, practically speaking, there is frequently an immense amount of confusion and mutual incomprehension when we try to talk about it. Mysticism is often defined something like this: “a domain of religion that deals with the search for and the attainment of a profound experiential knowledge of God or of ultimate reality.”<sup>2</sup> Or this: “mysticism is ... a type of religious experience which involves a sense of union or merging with either God or an all-pervading spiritual force in the universe.”<sup>3</sup> Notice the distinction here between the search for “profound experiential knowledge” and “a sense of union or merging.” Which is it? Either? Both?

While definitions like these are in some ways reasonable attempts to define mysticism, they are also often vague and confusing. Is an atheist physicist seeking “experiential knowledge” of the “ultimate reality” of particle physics in a materialistic universe through

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<sup>1</sup> McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Harmless, *Mystics* (Oxford, 2008), 263.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Oliver, *Mysticism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (Continuum, 2009), 18.

scientific investigation a mystic? And why do some definitions of mysticism include *either* the search for knowledge of God *or* ultimate reality? Largely because if mysticism is the search for a direct experience or union with God, then some forms of Buddhism, like Zen, could not be considered mysticism. “Any use of mystical language must undergo serious redefining if it is to be applied to Zen [Buddhism] or to any of a variety of Eastern [mystical] traditions.”<sup>4</sup> But since Zen Buddhism is assumed *a priori* by many to be mystical, the original definition of mysticism derived from Christian religious beliefs and practices must be modified to include Zen.

The traditional definition of mysticism as a search for direct knowledge or unity with God that makes sense in Christianity, Judaism or Islam must necessarily be changed to accommodate radically different phenomena and assumptions found in Buddhism. But why should we try to equate the search for “a profound experiential knowledge of God” with the Zen search for *nirvāṇa*? “*Nirvāṇa* [at least as understood in some forms of Buddhism] is also not a relational state, ... it is *not* the meeting of two distinct selves or realities [God and the mystic] who come together in a loving embrace [as in Judaism, Christianity or Islam]. *Nirvāṇa* is the absence of all relation, all personality, all love, all feeling, all individuality, all identity.”<sup>5</sup> These and similar problematic issues found in attempts to coherently define mysticism are further complicated by the introduction of the assumptions neomysticism.

### **What is Neomysticism?**

By neomysticism I refer to popularized forms of mysticism as generally understood and practiced largely in the West from the late nineteenth century onward. I will call pre-nineteenth century forms of mysticism classical or traditional. I need to emphasize that there are many different forms of neomysticism, each with its own unique perspectives and practices. Most of them, however, share many, if not most of the characteristics and assumptions I will describe in this paper. My discussion is thus a generic overview of broadly shared assumptions of a wide variety of neomystical movements, rather than the specific evaluation of the ideas and practices of one particular branch of neomysticism.

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<sup>4</sup> Harmless, *Mystics*, 221.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 39.

Neomysticism is founded on the development of a number of different disciplines and ideas in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These include the rise of the study of comparative religion, Jungian psychology, esotericism, orientalism, syncretism, and post modernism. Neomysticism is based not so much on actual mystical experiences--although this is certainly important--but on the development of new ways of understanding the mystical experiences of traditional mystics. This is not to say that neomystics don't have mystical experiences. Rather, it is to say that Their understanding of their own neomystical experiences is based on a number of assumptions that I see as misunderstandings of traditional mystics and their texts.

A classic example of the rise and impact of neomysticism can be found in the the popularization in the late twentieth century of one of the most famous mystical texts, the *Zohar*. The *Zohar* was originally a secret, esoteric book. Written or edited by Jewish Rabbi Moses of Leon in late thirteenth century Spain, it was not intended to be read by the general public. Indeed, it was never intended to be understood by *reading* it at all. It was intended to be read orally along with in-depth discussions in small groups of initiates, accompanied by explanations of an esoteric master, who had learned the meaning of the *Zohar* from his master. This is clear from the fact that it was written in Aramaic, a language that was no longer spoken by the Jews of thirteenth century Spain. Knowledge of Aramaic among European Jews was generally restricted to a subset of literate, highly educated males who had studied the Aramaic Talmud in depth. The *Zohar* also assumes that the reader has essentially memorized the entire text of the Hebrew Bible. It makes frequent allusions to scriptural passages by only quoting a couple of words, assuming the reader knows the entire passage by heart and would recognize it without difficulty.<sup>6</sup>

The *Zohar* was thought to contain powerful esoteric truths that were too complicated and important to be explained to ordinary Jews, let alone the gentiles. In the wrong hands, it could culminate in the misuse of its miraculous powers, or in madness or apostasy.<sup>7</sup> The esoteric master of the *Zohar* had to carefully evaluate candidates for the mysteries, and he alone could

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<sup>6</sup> This method of allusive reference to passage of the Hebrew Bible is also found throughout the New Testament and other ancient literature.

<sup>7</sup> Four who entered Paradise.

decide who was, and was not permitted to study these divine secrets. This is why the printing of the *Zohar* in Italy around 1560 caused such a scandal, and was opposed by many of the greatest contemporary *meqebalim*, or Kabbalists.

Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag (1885-1954), was a tremendously important interpreter of the *Zohar* from the Lurianic school, who believed that the time had come for the *Zohar* to be read by all Jews rather than simply the esoteric elite. He therefore translated the *Zohar* into Hebrew, along with an extensive commentary, making it more accessible to ordinary Jews. Ashlag's views were then given a New Age syncretistic interpretation by the Bergs of the Kabbalah Centre,<sup>8</sup> who believe that the *Zohar* should be a universal text for all people, not just Jews. All of these developments are frequently conflated by modern neo-kabbalists into a confused hodgepodge of beliefs that are virtually indistinguishable from New Age ideas, and which would have been all but incomprehensible to the original readers of the *Zohar*.

Similar patterns can be found in the transmission of the mysticism of Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, or Sufism to the West. All of these neomystical movements are part of broader religious phenomena of modernity that can likewise be seen in popular movement and ideas such as individualistic religion, esotericism, neopaganism, religious syncretism, Jungian psychology and New Age spirituality.

It is my opinion that modern neomystic attempts at equating and merging a wide range of diverse forms of spiritual practices and beliefs found in many different religions under the rubric of mysticism are dubious, outsider activities. Furthermore, finding a definition of mysticism that is narrow enough to include the specific mystical practices and beliefs of a particular religion or movement, and yet at the same time is broad enough to include all the beliefs and practices of Jews, Muslims, Buddhists or Hindus is basically impossible. As Gershom Scholem put it: "there is no mysticism as such, there is only the mysticism of a particular religious system, Christian, Islamic, Jewish mysticism, and so on."<sup>9</sup> The term "mysticism" always requires a qualifier. This is related to the problem of reification--that is, "mentally making [mysticism] into a thing,

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.kabbalah.com/>

<sup>9</sup> G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (1941), 6

gradually coming to conceive it as an objective systematic entity.”<sup>10</sup> This view directly contradicts some fundamental assumptions of neomystics. I’d like to focus on four of these.

## 1. The Transcendental Unity of Mysticism

Neomystics generally make the “claim that all religions are the same at the top--that mystics speak with a certain unanimity, that one can glide easily from Christian mystics to Islamic mystics to Buddhist mystics, and that, once one prunes off that extraneous overgrowth called theology, one uncovers an irreducible common core” to all mysticism.<sup>11</sup> Neomystics, it is sometimes claimed, have transcended the theological limits of all denominations to become a sort of “transcultural aristocracy of [mystical] illuminati.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, neomystics tend to be non-denomination, para-denominational or trans-denominational.

Traditional mystics, on the other hand, are always closely associated with the doctrines and practices of a specific religion. It is my contention that neomystical assumptions have created confusion regarding mysticism, rather than increased clarity and intelligibility. Being similar does not imply being the same.<sup>13</sup> Because two mystical traditions have some things in common it does not follow that they have everything in common. To claim that all religions contain truth does not require us to believe that all religions are the same, nor that any are fully or equally true. Such a claim can only be made only by carefully picking one’s cosmic cherries.

No traditional mystics before the late nineteenth century would have accepted the idea of the transcendental unity of mysticism. Traditional mystics have always been inseparable from their specific denomination. Traditional mystics weren’t a Muslim Sufi one day and Hindu Bhakta the next. Traditional Sufis don’t have a “mystical” relationship with the “Ultimate Reality.” They have a *taṣawwufī* relationship with Allāh, intimately based on the Qur’ān. It is impossible to imagine Sufis without the Qur’ān. Likewise, medieval Greek Orthodox Hesychast

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<sup>10</sup> W. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, (1963), 51.

<sup>11</sup> Harmless, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Gimello, “Mysticism in Its Contexts,” in Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, 86.

<sup>13</sup> Prothero, *God is Not One* (HarperOne, 2011).

mystics would almost certainly have rejected the idea that their practices, beliefs and experiences have anything to do with Hinduism or Buddhism.

For neomystics, a specific religion with its doctrines and scripture is merely an “extrinsic crust” encasing the heart of true mysticism.<sup>14</sup> A specific religion is envisioned rather like an art form. Painting, architecture, sculpture, poetry, music, literature can all reveal truth and beauty. “The experience of all [mystics] are basically the same [they claim] ... [but] each puts upon his experiences the intellectual interpretations which he has derived from the peculiarities of his own culture.”<sup>15</sup> But for traditional mystics, religion was not only essential, it was the essence of mysticism. Neomysticism is transferable between religions, and, indeed, in its secular forms, can be practiced without religion at all. For traditional Zen Buddhists, you had to be a Buddhist monk to practice *zazen*--“seated meditation.” For neomystics, anyone, from any religion, or indeed no religion at all, can practice mystical meditation. There are neomystics who claim to be Sufis, but insist they are not Muslims. “Classical mystics do not talk about the abstraction ‘mysticism’; they talk only about their tradition, their ‘way’, their ‘goal’: they do not [generally] recognize the legitimacy of any other.”<sup>16</sup>

Neomystics are also extraordinarily syncretistic. “They cast mystical experience as the bedrock of all religion and [argue] that those who founded religions or those who reformed religions were all mystics. Mysticism became romanticized, globalized, bloated. It [gets] applied to any and all manner of vague cosmic feelings.”<sup>17</sup>

All of these ideas are related to the widespread assumption among Neomystics that everyone is right, and there is no wrong way to practice mysticism. This is in contrast to traditional mystics who constantly feared illusion, temptation, hallucination and demonic interference. Traditional mystics were well aware that there could be false mysticism as well as fraudulent mystics, even within their own denomination. A large part of mystical training centered on helping the disciple discern the true from the false mystical experiences.

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<sup>14</sup> Harmless, *Mystics*, 232.

<sup>15</sup> Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, (1961), 34-35.

<sup>16</sup> Steven Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 45.

<sup>17</sup> Harmless, 262.

The belief that all mystical experiences are ultimately the same is a uniquely modern claim, which requires some reflective analysis. It is generally made by two groups. First neomystics generally posit a transcendental unity of religion and God, and believe that God or “the Ultimate Reality” manifests itself in different ways and with different symbols to different cultures and religions in different times. This position is given its most sophisticated philosophical and theological form by the Perennialists such as René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon.<sup>18</sup> The Perennialists, however, make an important and complicated distinction between form and essence, and between exoteric and esoteric elements of religion which seems to elude many of the neomystics.

The second group making universalist mystical claims are secularist psychologists, popularized by Joseph Campbell, who agree that all mystical experiences are at root the same because they are entirely internal mental phenomena caused by human brain neurochemistry. For secular psychologists, there is no outside reality causing the mystical experience. It is only unusual brain chemistry that humans *wrongly* interpret as being caused by an external force or agency of some kind. The secular approach to mysticism is essentially reductionistic at several levels. All religious experience is mystical. All mystical experience is psychological. Therefore all religion is purely psychological. These claims would of course be vehemently denied by traditional mystics, who would insist that their mystical experiences represent a real encounter with the real God. These two groups--neomystics and secular psychologists--thus share the belief in the transcendental unity of mysticism, though for drastically different reasons.

Now, from a practical and objective point of view, what mystics report of their actual mystical experiences are often dramatically, even drastically different. But there is among some neomystics a “pervasive intolerance of, or inability to cope with genuine diversity among religions.”<sup>19</sup> At the most basic levels “original mystical reports reveal *different* experiences, not only different reports of the same experience.”<sup>20</sup> Yes, many mystics report that they feel an

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<sup>18</sup> Schoun, *The Transcendental Unity of Religions*, (1984/1993).

<sup>19</sup> R. Gimello, “Mysticism in its Contexts” 61.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” in S. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford, 1978), 29.

intense, overwhelming bliss, a sense of timelessness, or a oneness with God. But no Buddhist or Hindu mystic ever reported seeing the Virgin Mary crowned with twelve stars (Rev. 12:1). No medieval Christian mystic ever reported having a sense of oneness with the divine brought on by participating in ritual magical sexual intercourse like a Tantric Hindu mystic might. No traditional Jewish mystic was ever tempted or hindered by the demon Mara as Tibetan mystics frequently are. Without a pre-existing *assumption* that all mystical experiences are somehow one, no one reading the actual reports of the vastly different mystical experiences from many different cultures and times would possibly assume they are describing the same thing. From a purely objective perspective, mystical experiences and texts are extraordinarily diverse, even within a single religious tradition. Neomystics tend to change the multi-chromatic wonders of mysticism into a monochrome sameness.

## 2. Neomystical Focus on the Self

Traditional mysticism focused on God. Neomysticism focuses on the Self, however conceived. Neomysticism tends to be idiosyncratic and pragmatic rather than traditional. If it works for me, it's true. Neomystics often choose sometimes incompatible bits and pieces from the smörgåsbord of world mysticism. The neomystic might select a bit of Zen, mixed with a piece of Sufism, tied together with neopaganism, and garnished with Jungian psychology.

The highly individualistic nature of neomysticism is highlighted by comparison with the widespread participation in communal life among traditional mystics. Living one's life in a mystical community was essential to many forms of traditional mysticism. Mystical communal life linked past generations of mystical masters with a living mystical community, binding them together in time and space. Furthermore, the transcendent nature of mystical communities was thought to connect the temporal with eternal, the mortal with the divine.

For traditional mystics, mysticism is a complete lifestyle, usually lived in groups, and nearly always guided by a master, who had achieved the mystical goal, and disciples who were seeking it. Hence the importance in traditional mystical master: the Sufi *muršid*, the Russian Orthodox *starets*, the Zen *sensei*, or the Hindu *guru*. The most important ideas were only revealed orally by a master to his disciple. The key concepts of "mystical wisdom was always

held very close by its devotees and was only taught in small circles to a select few.”<sup>21</sup> Isaac Luria.

Christian mysticism has historically been intimately connected with monasticism in both its eastern and western forms of Christianity. The greatest mystics were usually monks. Mystical union with God--the ultimate goal of the Christian mystic--was believed attainable only by people who spent their entire lives on the monastic path in utter devotion to God.<sup>22</sup> It is not something you could do on a weekend retreat. The great Orthodox mystical compendium the *Philokalia* assumes its readers are monks. The importance of the *samgha* to Buddhism, and of Sufi *turuq* or orders in Islam, are other manifestations of the significance of communal mystical life among traditional mystics. This monastic monopoly in traditional Christian mysticism began to break down only in the early modern period with the rise of para-monastic lay mystical movements. The contemporary belief that one can be a part time or weekend mystic without fully living a mystical life is fundamental a deviation from traditional mysticism. Mystical teachings were generally esoteric and reserved for highly trained and properly prepared disciples. Traditional mysticism was not for the masses.

Another fundamental neomystical tendency is to “isolate the psychological as the centerpiece of the mystical.”<sup>23</sup> “The far more sensible way of thinking about the mystical,” Robert Forman assures us, “is that in it we are encountering the self.”<sup>24</sup> (Which might be surprising to Buddhists.) Mysticism “allow[s] the nonlinguistic inner presence [of a person] to reflexively reveal itself to itself: consciousness showing itself to consciousness.”<sup>25</sup> The traditional journey of the soul to God becomes instead a journey of the Self into the Self. Hence the widespread talk of self-realization and self-awareness among neomystics. The reality is, of

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<sup>21</sup> Steven Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 43.

<sup>22</sup> See the major mystical figures outlined in B. McGinn's *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mystics*, 5 vols. 2004-2012, where as far as I can tell nearly all of the major Christian mystics he describes are monks or nuns.

<sup>23</sup> Harmless, 245.

<sup>24</sup> Forman, 170.

<sup>25</sup> Forman, 172.

course, that no traditional mystics before the twentieth century understood or believed in psychology as conceptualized by moderns. Indeed, in its original Greek form the term *psuchēlogia*, if there had been such a word, would have meant the “study of the soul,” not the mind or personality as we understand it. Traditional mysticism has nothing to do with psychology because psychology was unknown to traditional mystics. Neomystics are attempting to force traditional mystics into a psychological procrustean bed.

### 3. The Nature of Mystical Experiences

As we have noted, for neomystics the *individual's* mystical experience is sovereign. This “modern accent on [mystical] experience distorts the usual mystical balance: [for traditional mystics] scriptures measure experience, not vice versa.”<sup>26</sup>

Neomystics sometimes tend to emphasize peak mystical experiences rather than living the mystical life. “Too often we zoom in on dazzling moments of [mystical] spiritual virtuosity, abstracting them from the disciplinary routine.”<sup>27</sup> Traditional mystics were like musicians or athletes, or mountaineers, requiring years of constant and intense training to ascend a mystical peak. Indeed, early Christian monks were often called the *athlētēs theou*, the “athlete of God,” reflecting the rigorous spiritual training they had to undergo, and the amazing spiritual powers they achieved. But the peak moments were not the essence of traditional mysticism; Christian “mystical experiences [should be described as] the extraordinary moments of prayer within a lifetime of ordinary moments of prayer.”<sup>28</sup> Do Buddhist mystics pray?

Neomysticism also focuses on meditation. Traditional mystical concepts of contemplation can be equated with modern neomystical mediation only in its broadest sense. The equation of the two is a modern construct. *Contemplatio*, or contemplation, is the Latin translation of the Platonic Greek term *theoria*, which means “looking at or gazing upon.” In its Christian form it has little to do with Buddhist-style meditation. Christian mystical

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<sup>26</sup> Harmless, 232.

<sup>27</sup> Harmless, 247.

<sup>28</sup> Harmless, 248.

contemplation focused on achieving the *visio beatifica*, the beatific vision. It was, in fact, a contemplative *vision* of the divine, not a meditation on Zen emptiness. Jesuit Contemplation

For neomystics, the mystical experience often *is* the ultimate purpose of mysticism. For traditional mystics, the focus was always on an *exterior* object of contemplation--be it Christ, Allah, or Shiva--not on the particular experience or method by which you contemplated the divine. For neomystics, primary spiritual allegiance is often to mysticism itself, rather than a particular religion, belief, practice, or deity.

Consider, for example, the famous vision of Francis on Mount La Verna in 1224, where he saw a seraph and the crucified Christ.<sup>29</sup> This cannot possibly be seen as a generic experience of mystical bliss. It was terrifying, and culminated in a physical manifestation when Francis received the wounds of the crucifixion in his hands and side. It is a profoundly Christian vision, evoking a direct and personal knowledge of the meaning of the theophany in Isaiah 6, and Paul's exclamation in Galatians 1:7: "I bear on my body the marks (*stigmata*) of Jesus," which Francis likewise received. In its full meaning, it could not possibly have been comprehended by a traditional Jew, Muslim or Buddhist. It was not a *mystic* experience. It was a uniquely *Christian* mystic experience. To try to reduce it to a generic mystical feeling is to deny the power and reality of what Francis himself believed about his own experience.

#### 4. Neomysticism and Mystical Texts

Neomysticism is often plagued by literary decontextualization, chronological anachronism, and linguistic conflation. Many books by neomystics indulge in cherry picking selected decontextualized mystical texts, which are then often paraphrased rather than translated. Such books tend to ignore or minimize both historical context and linguistic nuance. Against widespread neomystical assumptions, I believe that "mysticism is inextricably bound up with, dependent upon, and usually subservient to the deeper beliefs and values of the [religions], traditions, cultures, and historical milieux which harbour it."<sup>30</sup> No Christian mystic ever saw a

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<sup>29</sup> Ewert Cousins, "Francis of Assisi: Christian Mysticism at the Crossroads," in S. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (Oxford, 1983), 163-190.

<sup>30</sup> R. Gimello, "Mysticism in its Contexts" 63.

vision of the Hindu goddess Shakti. No Zen Buddhist ever encountered the Virgin Mary. No Muslim Sufi ever had a vision of the crucified Christ like St. Francis. All forms of mysticism--including neomysticism--are profoundly grounded in the texts, beliefs, practices and assumptions of their own time, culture and religion.

Neomystics ignore this fundamental reality at their peril. "Choosing descriptions of mystic experience *out of their total context* does *not* provide grounds for their comparability but rather severs all grounds of their intelligibility for it empties the chosen [mystical] phrases, terms, and descriptions of definite meaning."<sup>31</sup> Which points to the problem of language. Traditional mystical texts are extraordinarily complex and can be understood only with careful attention to the nuances of their original language and historical context. For example, the most literal English translation of the Buddhist concept of *anātman* is "selfless." But "selfless" would make absolutely no mystical sense in English, since it means caring about others, while *anātman* refers to the Buddhist belief that there is no ultimate reality of the self or soul.

The problem of reading traditional mystics in translation is compounded by the profound intertextuality of nearly all traditional mystical texts with both their scripture, and with the writings of earlier mystics. Scripture always informs and fills traditional mystical texts. A reader who is unfamiliar with the Qur'ān will never fully understand a Sufi text. Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's *Masnavi* is called the *Quran-i Parsi*--the Persian Qur'ān--in part because of its tremendously important role in Persian mysticism, but also because it so frequently quotes, paraphrases, or alludes to the Qur'ān. All of these Qur'ānic allusions, which are foundational to properly understanding Rūmī, are completely obscured by, for example, Colman Barks' popular neomystic paraphrase.<sup>32</sup> In a sense Rūmī and other Muslim mystics have been systematically de-Qur'ānized to make them comprehensible and palatable to a non-Muslim neomystical audience. Yet by that very process, Rūmī ceases to be Rūmī.

For traditional mystics, scriptural exegesis is itself a mystical experience, and scriptural commentaries are among the most common forms of mystical texts. The point of traditional mysticism is often to gain first-hand, experiential knowledge of the esoteric meaning of

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<sup>31</sup> Steven Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 47.

<sup>32</sup> Colman Barks, *The Essential Rumi*, (HarperCollins, 1995).

scripture. That is, the Christian mystic wants to *know* Christ through mystically entering his presence, as opposed to knowing *about* Christ by reading stories in the New Testament.

Another aspect of the problem of language is that mystics frequently claim that their experiences are ineffable, that is, they cannot be explained in human language. As Laozi, one of the great Chinese mystics, said in the *Daodejing*: *zhī zhě bù yàn; yàn zhě bù zhī*. “He who knows does not speak; he who speaks does not know.” (Paradoxically, Laozi then goes on to discuss the Dao at length in his own book.) Ineffability seems to have two aspects within mysticism. The first is the idea that mystical knowledge is inexplicable, transcending human language. The second is that mystical ideas are unutterable, that is, they must not be discussed with outsiders. In both cases, understanding mystical texts is extremely complex.

Neomystics sometimes claim that the widespread ineffability of mystical experiences reflects the transcendental unity of mysticism. However, just because two things are inexplicable does not imply that they are the same. Music is ineffable. So is art. Neither the experience of listening to music or seeing a painting can be fully explained in language. But this does not imply that a Beethoven symphony is the same as a Rafael painting. The fact that many mystics describe their experiences as ineffable does not mean that they are all having the same experience. Radically different experiences can be equally ineffable.

## Conclusion

My conclusion is that, although there would be no neomysticism without traditional mysticism, neomystics refuse to take the reports of traditional mystics seriously. Neomysticism is not a reconciliation of all forms of mysticisms, transcending and uniting all previous mystical experiences and texts. It is, in fact, a *new* culturally based misunderstanding of traditional mystical experiences, which necessarily devalues traditional mystical experiences in order to validate their own neomystical beliefs and assumptions. It is, in reality, not the ultimate unification of all old forms of mysticism, but a new form mysticism.

Thus, the claim that all mystical experiences are the same is in fact an esoteric reinterpretation designed to arrive at the purported “real” meaning of mystical experiences. It is a further esotericizing of the already esoteric. It represents a devaluation of the authenticity of

the mystical claims of traditional mystics. For the Neomystics to be correct they must at least tacitly assert that the traditional mystics have in some way fundamentally misunderstood their own mystical experiences. A traditional Christian mystic might claim she actually saw the real Virgin Mary. The universalistic claims of the Neomystics, however, imply that this vision of the Virgin Mary is not an authentic encounter with the divine in and of itself, but is a cultural-based symbol, which religion has interposed as a *barrier* to the authentic encounter with the transcendental Reality beyond and behind the symbols of all mystical claims.

The commercialization of neomysticism is also, to my mind, another serious problem. The true mystic has disciples, not clients. True mystics don't make a living at mysticism. They certainly don't make a fortune at it. The commercialization of mysticism--where one can buy and sell the tokens of mystical knowledge--is one of the great spiritual tragedies of the twentieth century.

We need to "recognize religious differences for what they are." This is possible only if we "take mystic's language seriously."<sup>33</sup> For the Christian mystic, the mystical meaning of scripture is Christ Jesus. For the Muslim mystic, Allāh is not a Trinity. For the Zen Buddhist mystic, *nirvāṇa* is not union with God. These things mattered to the classic mystics, and they should matter to us. Even if there is an ultimate shared divine reality behind all of this, the details of the differences still matter. The fundamental incoherence of neomysticism is that, while claiming to transcend and unify all sectarian forms of mysticism, it in fact devalues them. Neomysticism has the form of mysticism, but denies the power thereof.

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<sup>33</sup> Harmless, 257.