

IS THE ROYAL COUPLE REALLY ON A “MYSTICAL” JOURNEY?

By Nick Gier

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My Me is God, nor do I recognize any other Me except God Himself.

~St. Catherine of Genoa

Misuse of our language is rampant, and I am writing today to “refudiate” (thank you Sarah) all malapropisms and linguistic misapplications. I hope I don’t “misremember” (thank you George) all the instances that I have encountered.

As a philosophy professor I’m most troubled with so many people “feeling” their opinions. As any good counselor will tell you, feelings are neither right nor wrong—they just are. What people believe, however, is usually subject to verification. With so many people immune to proper fact finding, I suppose feeling opinions and thereby destroying their validity is all that is left to them.

As a theology professor, my pet peeve is the misuse of the word “mystical.” One of the most amazing instances that I’ve found is Robert Penn Warren describing the Civil War as “that mystic cloud from which emerged our modernity.” Only persons can be mystics and only they can have mystical experiences. This is poetic license gone amok.

The last straw for me was Tina Brown’s swoon that Prince William and Catherine Middleton are on a “mystical” journey. Christ and Krishna may well have mystical union with their devotees, but I don’t think that Middleton qualifies as a mystical bride of Christ. Especially since she shared a bed with her prince before marriage.

Leading Nazarene pastors are now complaining about the “mysticism” taught at their universities. Idaho’s own Northwest Nazarene University is one of those targeted with promoting “pagan prayer labyrinths.” Pagan rituals are not mystical practices, and the faculty that I know there are good scholars not mystics.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the “mystical” as “spiritual union with God transcending human comprehension.” This I believe is a good basic definition, but it needs to be revised to include those who claim union with an impersonal reality such as the Hindu Brahman. All mystics report that the individual self is completely dissolved and identified with ultimate reality.

While mystics have different names for the divine One, they all agree that the mystical experience is ineffable, confirming the second part of the OED definition. Therefore, we have two necessary but only together sufficient conditions for a mystical experience: a union with ultimate reality that is ineffable.

St. Catherine of Genoa, a medieval mystic, speaks of the dissolution of the self into God

in the following way: "My Me is God, nor do I recognize any other Me except God Himself." Catherine's position is a mystical interpretation of Paul's famous phrase "Not I, but Christ." This is essentially the same as the Hindu saying "Not I, but Brahman," or the Buddhist saying "Not I, but the Buddha nature."

After the 1989 earthquake in San Francisco one commentator said that it had destroyed the "mystical" beauty of the Bay Area. The general experience of beauty is not mystical because it fulfills only the ineffability criterion. Usually we do not claim that we have become one with the beautiful object.

The most common misapplication of the word mysticism is confusing it with the mysterious. One of my favorite examples is NPR interviewee who claimed that llamas have "mystical" stress relieving qualities. Robert Penn Warren can't be using the "mystic cloud" of the Civil War in this way, can he? The war must have clarified rather than mystified how the war brought America into the modern age.

When people say that a book, a religion, or a philosophy is "mystical," they usually mean that it is deep, profound, speculative, metaphysical, esoteric, or just plain philosophical. The confusion between metaphysical and mystical is especially common. To a trained philosopher metaphysics is simply a study of fundamental reality, which could range from a belief that all things are material to all things being mental or spiritual. A "metaphysical" bookstore will have some books by mystics, but you will find most of them on esoteric or occult teachings, ranging from reincarnation, lost civilizations, channeling, or alien visitations.

In our English literature classes we learn that William Blake was a great "mystical" poet, but his major poems describe visions not union with God. A vision is full of vivid images and has a narrative line, one that can be explained in words. By contrast the mystical experience has little or no content and the mystic confesses that the experience cannot be expressed in language. The writer of the Book of Revelation is reporting fantastic visions not a mystical experience.

The most egregious misuse of the word is those authors describing contemporary physics as mystical. In *The Tao of Physics* Fritjof Capra repeatedly claims that Asian mysticism has been confirmed by science. Here is one sample passage: "The harmony between their views confirms the ancient Indian wisdom that Brahman, the ultimate reality without, is identical to the Atman, the reality within."

Yes, there are some very mysterious—even perverse as one writer quipped—things going on in this exciting discipline. Physicists and scientists in general are investigating the basic elements of reality, but they have no experiences of union with them nor does reality appear to them as undifferentiated.

In a strict sense physics is the very opposite of mysticism, because it has divided up reality into literally hundreds of discrete subatomic particles, each with its own distinct signature. The best terms to use to describe the new discoveries are "organic" and "holistic," not "mystical." Furthermore, a unity of parts does not mean union without remainder.

One might say that the naked singularity of the moment before the Big Bang is a mystical

reality, but just a little scrutiny will show what a rash claim that might be. We know that the singularity would have been infinitely dense, but the mystics tell us that the divine unity is infinitely expansive.

Nature mysticism is the most widespread form of mystical experience. Many people have had powerful experiences of unity with nature that they have declared to be ineffable. Zen Buddhism and Chinese Daoism are very good examples of nature mysticism. We ordinary folk think that we perceive mountains, streams, and valleys, but Zen techniques jolt us out of these banal perceptions so that we come to see mountains, streams, and valleys for the very first time. But if we are clearly perceiving individual things, this is not a OED mystical union.

Some might speculate that the mystical experience is “all in the head,” and might propose that it is nothing but an altered state of consciousness. If this is so, then the experience could be created either by some form of brain stimulation or the ingestion of a drug. In his book *The Doors of Perception*, Aldous Huxley reports about his experiments with the drug mescaline and the altered states of consciousness that it produced. Most drug experiences, however, appear visionary rather than mystical, because they usually contain vivid content and most subjects appear to be able to give some account of them.

The most controversial Christian mystic was Meister Eckhart (1260–1327), who sometimes called God “merely nothing.” For Eckhart this was not just emptiness, but a nothingness which is all things—a no-thing-ness—no particular thing. As Eckhart states: “The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine that they should see God, as if He stood there and they here. This is not so. God and I, we are one in knowledge,” and in reality, I will add.

The reader will note that Eckhart is not a saint but is honored solely by his master’s degree. The church declared him a heretic for denying the personality of God. In most Asian traditions mystics were admired and their union with the divine was taken as the highest spiritual goal. In stark contrast mystics have stood at the periphery of the Abrahamic religions and have been viewed with suspicion. Jealous priests rejected their claims that they could have direct access to God outside the church and its sacraments.

Catholics and mainline Protestants have learned to appreciate Christian mystics, and I urge evangelicals to use the word correctly and rediscover the deep meaning of this universal religious experience. The Apostle Paul’s “Christ mysticism” is biblical and it is profound.

Nick Gier taught philosophy and religion at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read his scholarly essay on mysticism at www.NickGier/mysticism.pdf.