

THE LOGIC OF MYSTICISM

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Abstract. I argue that mystical experience essentially involves two aspects: (a) an element of direct encounter with God, and (b) an element of union with God. The framework I use to make sense of (a) is taken largely from William Alston's magisterial book *Perceiving God*. While I believe Alston's view is correct in many essentials, the main problem with the account is that it divorces the idea of encountering or perceiving God from the idea of being united with God. What I argue, on the contrary, is that because our experience of God is an experience of a relationship-seeking, personal being, it brings with it an important element of union that Alston overlooks.

The Christian of the future will either be a mystic or will cease to be anything at all.

Karl Rahner

The teaching of the Church would have no hold on souls if it did not in some degree express an inner experience of truth, granted in different measure to each one of the faithful. There is, therefore, no Christian mysticism without theology; but, above all, there is no theology without mysticism.

Vladimir Lossky

Jesuits were and still are the leavening – not the only one but perhaps the most effective – of Catholicism: culture, teaching, missionary work, loyalty to the pope. Ignatius was a reformer and a mystic, which is critical for the Church because a religion without mystics is a philosophy.

Pope Francis

I. INTRODUCTION

I begin with the quotes above in order to bring out a tension in our understanding of mysticism.¹ If Karl Rahner, Vladimir Lossky, and Pope Francis are correct, mystical experience is crucial to the life of the Christian – not just the extraordinary or virtuoso Christian, but the ordinary Christian in the pew, or the everyday Christian on the street. Without it, to use Pope Francis's words, Christianity would be at risk of becoming a 'philosophy' – a mere set of propositions, or a dead letter.

At the same time, I suspect that if you asked an everyday Christian on the street whether he was a mystic, he would probably find it hard to take the question seriously. '*Of course not*', he might say. And the reason seems to be that in the popular mind, at least in the Western world, mysticism is associated with the highest reaches of the spiritual life, with visions and ecstasies and profound unitive experiences with God. Since most people have not experienced anything like this, mysticism seems far removed from their lives.

In this paper I will try to develop an account of mystical experience that makes sense of both of these attitudes: on the one hand, the attitude of the everyday Christian on the street that takes mystical experience to be quite rare and remote; on the other hand, the attitude of theologians such as Rahner and Lossky and perhaps Pope Francis that mystical experience is, to the extent that faith is not a dead letter to many believers, quite widespread.

The key to reconciling these views, I will suggest, is to recognize that mystical experience essentially involves two aspects: (a) an element of direct encounter with God, and (b) an element of union with God.

The framework I will use to make sense of (a) – what it might mean to directly encounter God – is taken largely from William Alston's magisterial book *Perceiving God*. While I believe Alston's view is correct in many essentials, the main problem with the account, I will suggest, is that it divorces the idea of encountering or perceiving God from the idea of being united with God. What I will argue, on the contrary, is that because our experience of God is an experience of a relationship-seeking, personal being, it brings with it an important element of union that Alston overlooks.

The notion of union, however, comes in degrees, and what a renowned

¹ The quotes can be found in Rahner (1971: 15), Lossky (1991: 9), and (for Pope Francis) Glatz (2013).

mystic such as St. Teresa of Avila or St. John of the Cross enjoys is a greater or more complete or more abiding communion with God, whereas for the Christian on the street the communion is typically partial or spotty or incomplete – more often than not interrupted by selfishness or the cares of the world.

In a way then what I will be trying to flesh out is the following insight from Edouard Récéjac:

The mystic experience ends with the words, 'I live, yet not I, but God in me'. This feeling of identification, which is the term of mystical activity, has a very important significance. In its early stages the mystic consciousness feels the Absolute in opposition to the Self ... as mystic activity goes on, it tends to abolish this opposition ... When it has reached its term the consciousness finds itself possessed by the sense of a Being at one and the same time greater than the Self and identical with it: great enough to be God, intimate enough to be me. (Edouard Récéjac, quoted in Underhill 1961: 82)

Although what Récéjac focuses on here is the terminal or end state, where God wholly suffuses someone's life, what I find particularly interesting about this passage is his description of the beginning state – what Récéjac calls the 'early stages' of mystical consciousness. It is these early stages of mystical consciousness or mystical experience, on my view, that are enjoyed by the Christian on the street, for whom Christianity is not a dead letter. And it is crucial not to let our appreciation of the terminal state obscure or overwhelm our understanding of the early stages of mystical experience.

In order to see how we can make sense of these points within Alston's account of mystical experience, in the following two sections I will first note how his view flows from more general considerations about the ontology of sense perception and the epistemology of perceptual beliefs that are well worth highlighting, especially for Russian audiences that might not be familiar with Alston's work. I will then indicate, in Sections 4 and 5, how I believe Alston's account needs to be supplemented in order to account for the unitive dimension of mystical experience.

II. ALSTON ON PERCEPTION AND PERCEIVING GOD

Alston defends a version of direct realism about the nature of perception. According to his Theory of Appearing, we perceive things in the world when they look or appear a certain way to us. I perceive the tomato in

my salad, for example, because it looks or appears a certain way to me. It presents itself *as red*, among other things.

According to Alston, that things look or appear a certain way to me is what distinguishes perception from other forms of consciousness. Perceiving the redness of the tomato is different from merely thinking about or remembering the redness of the tomato because in perception the object 'shows up' for me or is directly present to me. If the object were not directly present then it would be difficult to make this distinction, on his view.

Alston therefore rejects theories of perceptual consciousness in which the objects of perception are in some sense my own ideas or constructions. For Alston, in perception our mind literally reaches out to the world so that it incorporates worldly things – or at least, things external to us – as its objects.

Alston also stresses that perceiving things in this way is essentially independent of concepts or judgments or beliefs. It is one thing for an object to appear a certain way to someone, and another thing for someone to take it or judge that the thing is appearing in this way. A toy might appear or look *maroon* to a child, for instance, even though the child might lack the concept *maroon* and hence not yet be in a position to judge that the toy is maroon. Of course, Alston does not deny that in normal adult perception the appearing and the judging – or the applying of concepts – typically go hand in hand. He also does not deny that differing conceptual schemes might affect how things in the world present themselves to someone. His point is only that strictly speaking this conceptual machinery is not necessary for perception. What is necessary, again, is simply that an object look a certain way to someone, or that the object present itself in such-and-such a way.

Now, if this is a correct analysis of the nature of perception, Alston notes, then there seems to be no bar in principle to supposing that a normal human being might perceive God in various ways. Not in the sense that we would (visually) see God alongside other things in the world, or hear God in the way we might hear other objects. Rather, in the sense that God might be directly present in our experiences in various ways – that we might directly experience God as loving or as all-powerful or as merciful, for example.

A careful look at the writings of different mystics confirms this view, according to Alston. Consider the following three excerpts, which he cites:

[A]ll at once I ... felt the presence of God – I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it – as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether But the more I seek words to describe this intimate intercourse, the more I feel the impossibility of describing the thing by any of our usual images. At bottom the expression most apt to render what I feel is this: God was present, though invisible; he fell under no one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him. (Anonymous report, quoted in Alston 1991: 13)

He appears to the soul by a knowledge brighter than the sun. I do not mean that any sun is seen, or any brightness, but there is a light which, though unseen, illumines the understanding. (St. Teresa of Avila, quoted in Alston 1991: 13)

And beyond this the soul receives the gift of seeing God. God says to her ‘Behold Me!’ and the soul sees Him dwelling within her. She sees him more clearly than one man sees another. For the eyes of the soul behold a plentitude of which I cannot speak: a plentitude which is not bodily but spiritual, of which I can say nothing. And the soul rejoice in that sight with an ineffable joy; and this is the manifest and certain sign that God indeed dwells in her. (Angela of Foligno, quoted in Alston 1991: 13)

On Alston’s view, the key characteristics of perception are present in all of these cases. In particular, God is (apparently) directly present or given in the experiences described above in much the same way that objects in the environment are directly present or given in normal sensory perception. It is not as if in these cases we have vague religious feelings – perhaps, as Schleiermacher described, a persistent feeling of dependence – which are then *interpreted* as coming from God. Rather, just as in regular sense perception, we directly encounter the thing itself – God Himself – in our experience.

When we directly experience God in this way, Alston calls such experiences ‘mystical experiences’ or ‘mystical perceptions’ of God. He recognizes that this use of the term ‘mystical’ departs from the usual sense in that mystical experiences so understood need not be ‘unitive’ or ‘unitary’ (cf. Wainwright 1981) – that is, it is not essential to mystical experience as Alston understands it that one be united with God or that the mystic in some way ‘lose himself’ (or herself) in God. I will return to this claim later (in Section 4), arguing that Alston unnecessarily downplays the unitive element of mystical experience, even on his relatively spare perceptual model. But for the moment let me simply point out a few additional noteworthy elements of the view.

First, mystical experience understood in these terms could be, and arguably is, widely enjoyed. It is not the possession solely of the spiritual virtuosi among us, thus making it possible for Christianity to be more than a mere 'philosophy', or dead letter, to many believers. As Alston himself notes in a footnote, according to a 1968 survey of a wide range of Christian denominations, 75% took themselves to have been at some time aware of the presence of God (Alston 1991: 36, fn 24). Although I have not been able to find a comparable survey from the present day, I suspect that the numbers are roughly similar.

Second, to say that it is possible to experience or encounter God directly is not to suppose that the elements of mystery or incomprehension or unknowingness – all repeatedly emphasized throughout the Christian mystical tradition, East and West – have been drained out of the experience.

As Alston points out, to say that you perceive or encounter X is not to say that you have understood the true nature of X, that you have grasped its essential properties, or that you in any way fully comprehend it. Just as someone can experience water as wet without knowing anything about the essence of water (that it is H₂O, for instance), Alston claims that someone can experience God under certain descriptions (as loving, or as good, or as all-powerful, or simply as *present*) while knowing very little or perhaps nothing at all about how God is 'in Himself' (Alston 1991: 62). Directly experiencing God does not mean domesticating God, or supposing God easily fits our inadequate categories, or that the clouds of unknowingness surrounding God have been significantly dissipated.

Third, there is a sense in which on Alston's view our experience of God is non-discursive or not based on reason because for Alston there are a number of *sui generis* ways of learning about the world, reason (or rational insight) being but one.² According to Alston, the way many believers come to know about God is by experiencing God, not by reasoning about God according to the arguments of natural theology, or by rationally inferring God's existence on the basis of our subjective religious feelings. Instead, we can experience God in a direct or 'basic' way.³

² In this Alston is explicitly following the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (see especially Alston 1991: ch. 4).

³ Although the vocabulary is slightly different, a similar view also seems to be expressed by the great Russian philosopher and mystic Vladimir Solovyov, as described by Paul L. Gavrilyuk. 'Solovyov criticized the development of modern western European

Although it is sometimes claimed in the mystical tradition that our experience of God is ‘above’ or ‘beyond’ reason, for Alston the more accurate description would therefore seem to be that our experience of God is ‘beside’ reason, in the sense that our experience of God is but one of a number of ways in which we can come to know about the world – ways alongside rational insight, and ordinary sense perception, and introspection. At the same time, it should be emphasized that on this view believing in God on this basis is not *irrational* in the sense of ‘not answerable to reason at all’, because all of these different sources of knowledge can exert checks and balances on one another. The apparent deliverances of one source, as we shall see in the next section, can be overridden or defeated by the deliverances of another source.

Although I have just been noting a few ways in which Alston’s view aligns with several points of emphasis in the Christian mystical tradition, I will close this section by noting one point on which Alston departs from the tradition, on the question of the ineffability or indescribability of God. While William James and others have argued that ineffability is essential to mystical experience, Alston thinks this is an exaggeration. Consider the following striking account cited by James, and that Alston discusses in *Perceiving God*:

Without any expectation of it, without ever having the thought in my mind that there was any such thing for me, without any recollection that I had ever heard the thing mentioned by any person in the world, the Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed, it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love, for I could not express it in any other way. (Anonymous report, quoted in Alston 1991: 14)

According to Alston, from the fact that the author here needs to appeal to metaphor or analogy (‘waves and waves of liquid love’) in order to describe her experience, it does not follow that the experience is wholly ineffable or beyond words. As he notes, we often run up against the limits

philosophy for its one-sided emphasis on ‘abstract principles’ – rationalism, empiricism, positivism – to the exclusion of the mystical dimension of human experience. For Solovyov, mystical experience was not a peculiar form of religious experience that required an external justification by recourse to other forms of experience and defense from skepticism. On the contrary, mystical intuition into the underlying unity of all being, what Solovyov called “all-unity”, was the foundation of all knowledge and morality.’ (Gavrilyuk 2013: 495)

of literal language in our lives – not just in religion, but also in science, and philosophy, and interpersonal relations – and on these occasions metaphors and analogies help to convey real cognitive content (Alston 1991: 32).

Although our language often falters when we speak about God, and perhaps especially when mystics try to articulate the details of their encounters with God, on Alston's view it can nonetheless succeed well enough to give an accurate insight into how things stand.

III. THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

In the last section I tried to show how Alston's view of mystical experience fits in with his general account of perception, and how many elements of his view accord (and sometimes fail to accord) with common themes in the mystical tradition, both East and West. In this section I will briefly review some of the important implications of his account for the epistemology of religious belief.

A crucial distinction for Alston is that it is one thing for a belief to be justified on the basis of certain grounds and quite another to be able to show or demonstrate – at the second-order level – that the belief is justified on the basis of these grounds. More exactly, on his view for a belief to be justified is for it to be based on grounds that are reliable, in the sense that beliefs formed on the basis of these grounds are apt to be true. To show or demonstrate that a belief is justified would therefore be to show that the grounds of the belief are in fact reliable.

Now, suppose one were to try to blur this distinction, and to argue that a belief is justified only if one can show or demonstrate that the grounds of one's beliefs are reliable. The problem with this route, according to Alston, is that we can never show – in a non-circular, non-question begging way – that the grounds of our belief are reliable. For instance, to demonstrate that sense perception is reliable we would need to rely on the deliverances of sense perception – we would need to take for granted that perceptions X, Y, and Z were reliably formed, in order to build up a track record argument on behalf of the reliability of sense perception. And similarly for all of our beliefs, regardless of their source, Alston claims: even beliefs formed on the basis of rational insight would need to rely on the deliverances of rational insight, in any argument one might attempt to offer to demonstrate the reliability of rational insight.

But what then should our attitude be towards our first-order beliefs, if we lack the ability to vindicate or show that they are reliably formed (in a non-circular way)? According to Alston, and following the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid, the only practically rational thing to do is to take an ‘innocent until proven guilty’ approach. That is, and as a first approximation, the only practically rational thing to do is to suppose that our beliefs are *prima facie* justified until proven otherwise, or until they are defeated or overridden by our other beliefs.

I say ‘as a first approximation’, because Alston adds a social (what he calls ‘Wittgensteinian’) twist to this approach, because he claims that for a belief to enjoy the status of initial ‘innocence’ or *prima facie* justification, it needs to be part of what he calls a socially established doxastic practice – that is, a socially entrenched way of forming and evaluating beliefs.

Because of its deep embedding in the human condition, sense perception therefore counts as a socially entrenched way of forming beliefs, along with memory, rational insight, and introspection. One of Alston’s main claims in *Perceiving God* is that mystical perception too should count as a socially entrenched way of forming beliefs – one with a long history and highly developed ‘overrider system’, among other things.⁴

IV. ASSESSMENT

In the last two sections I have been laying out Alston’s account of the nature of mystical experience, and how it might serve as a basis for justifying or rationalizing beliefs about the existence of God. As I turn now to evaluating Alston’s views, the first point to note is that there is, in my view, a great deal to admire. In terms of the epistemology of religious belief, I believe Alston’s adoption of Thomas Reid’s ‘innocent until proven guilty’ standard for belief is both insightful and correct. To require that sources of belief be shown to be reliable, without in any way appealing to those sources as part of the demonstration, is an impossible task, and will lead inexorably into scepticism.

⁴ It has an overrider system in the sense that there are criteria within the mystical tradition for evaluating whether or not a mystical experience is genuine or not. Mystical perception also, according to Alston, enjoys a significant degree of self support, because it suggests that people who seem to have genuinely perceived God will go on to live holier, more devout, and more selfless lives, which frequently has proven to be the case.

More to the point of our current focus on mysticism, I believe that Alston's account of the nature of mystical experience is appealing in many ways. The idea that we can encounter God directly in our experience, and not simply on the basis of drawing inferences from other things that are 'closer' to us – such as how things appear in the world, or our own religious feelings – seems correct to me. If God exists at all, then I believe we should take at face value the countless believers who claim to have experienced or encountered God directly in their own lives. For a large majority of Christians in particular, it seems charitable to suppose that their faith is not simply a dead letter but is instead based on a living relationship with God.

Granted all this, however, we still have our initial problem to deal with: namely, that the overwhelming majority of Christians – at least in the West, or at least in the United States – would resolutely deny that they were mystics. For them, again, a mystic is someone who undergoes rapturous experiences, or is occasionally absorbed in a comprehensive way into God's very life, as a drop of water is absorbed into the ocean.

Put another way, the overwhelming majority of Christians suppose that being a mystic involves some sort of union with God, and – perhaps from an acute sense of their own sinfulness – they believe that union with God is more of an ideal than a reality.

My suggestion for how to resolve this tension is as follows. We should not abandon Alston's more egalitarian model of mystical experience – 'egalitarian' in the sense that it seems open to the average Christian – but should instead supplement it, in two main ways.

First, we should appreciate that because perceiving God or experiencing God's presence is radically unlike other forms of perception or experience, it involves elements of unification or communion that we do not find in other forms of perception. Second, and as noted earlier, we should recognize that unification or communion comes in degrees, and in particular that parties can be more or less unified the more they share certain goals or ideals or desires. At the high end of the scale, we find cases where the identification is more or less complete, where the attitude of 'not my will but thine be done' has taken hold. At the bottom end, we find perhaps the majority of Christians, where the union with God's will is not just very incomplete or partial, but often fleeting and intermittent.

To better appreciate the way in which an element of union seems to be present in all direct experiences or presentations of God, let us

first consider why Alston *rejects* this claim. In responding to William Wainwright's claim that mystical experiences are essentially 'unitary states' (Wainwright 1981: 1), Alston writes:

Thus our category of mystical experience and 'mystical experience' (more commonly so called) fail to coincide at several points [T]he most important distinction concerns the absolute unity that is central to the more common use of the term. As I have just been pointing out, experiences taken by their subjects to be direct awareness of God do not typically exhibit, even phenomenologically, any such absolute unity; and even where they do, this can be seen as an extreme case of *union* with God that more usually allows a consciousness of the interpersonal relationship. 'Mystical experience' and 'mystical perception', as we use those terms, do not imply absolute undifferentiated unity. (Alston 1991: 25)

Note here how extreme Alston's notion of unity is here, 'absolute undifferentiated unity', where distinctions between self and God are (apparently) entirely left behind.

If we think that union comes in degrees, however, while we can agree with Alston that most mystical experiences do not involve *absolute* unity, the possibility remains that some degree of unity or communion – perhaps meagre – is experienced by anyone who is directly aware of God in the way he describes.

Why should we think that some degree of union is present in mystical experience? Because, I think, of the nature of what it means to encounter or be aware of God in our experience. After all, becoming aware of God is not like becoming aware of a cup on the table; it is instead to become aware of a personal being of the most extraordinary sort. There are, moreover, two ways in which we might experience personal beings (or 'persons' for short, although I don't mean to imply that God is a person in the way human beings are persons). On the one hand, we might experience a personal being from a 'third-person' perspective, in which we are aware, in a removed, detached way of the ways the person is interacting with the world. On the other hand, we might experience a personal being from what Eleonore Stump (2012) has called a 'second-personal perspective' in which we encounter the person directly as a 'you' (or, as Martin Buber puts it, a *Thou*) and enter into relationship with that person.

The claim here is that when God enters into our lives by means of the sort of mystical experience described by Alston, it is always in a personal, relationship-seeking way. Perceiving or experiencing God is therefore always an experience of communion, or a meeting of personal beings in relationship, in a way that we do not find with our perceptions or experiences of cups.

How often do Christians undergo or enjoy experiences like this? Although anything I say here is bound to be speculative, I think the experience is fairly common, or at least not *uncommon*. Note, for instance, that many handbooks of Christian prayer begin by asking the person to 'gather himself' (or herself) and to call to mind that the person is in the presence of God. It is therefore a call to return to, or perhaps to newly form, a certain relationship. Even this would arguably involve *some* degree of unification, some meeting of persons, but of course Christian prayer typically goes further. Thus when the Our Father notes 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done', the implication is that the believer reciting the prayer is attempting to align his or her will with God's. And what could be a more substantial form of union than *volitional* union between believer and God?

Of course, it should go without saying that many Christians occasionally recite these prayers in a dry, rote way, so that the words *are* essentially dead letters. Still, when the believer is invested and focused and responding to the call of relationship, I see no reason to deny that these experiences might be legitimately unitive.

This relationship between experiencing God and union is beautifully described by the Carmelite British nun Ruth Burrows, in her book *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*:

When all is said and done, the long line of saints and spiritual writers who insist on 'experience', who speak of sanctity in terms of ever deepening 'experience', who maintain that to have none of it is to be spiritually dead, are absolutely right provided we understand 'experience' in the proper sense, not as a transient emotional impact but as living wisdom, loving involvement. (Burrows 2007: 55)

If Burrows is right, the sort of union that takes place in the personal experience of God is not a union of undifferentiated absorption but rather a union of 'loving involvement', a union where one often manages to take on or to assume the projects and cares of another person. But,

again, presumably this sort of loving involvement can come in degrees. Where there is more pervasive or persistent loving involvement – where one takes on more and more of the projects and cares of the other person – there is greater union.

A further passage from Burrows is worth noting, especially in light of our dialogue between East and West:

The mystical life is beyond our power, nothing we can do can bring it to us, but God is longing to give it to us, to all of us, not to a select few. He made us for this, *to share his divinity*, to become his sons and daughters in very truth, with all that this implies. (Burrows 2007: 6)

The first point mentioned by Burrows brings out a way in which mystical experience again seems significantly unlike other types of perceptual experience. For if mystical experience depends upon God reaching out to us or revealing Himself to us, this does not have a parallel in our experience of everyday objects in our environment – cups, tables, trees – where no sort of revelation or personal reaching out (on the part of what is perceived) is required.

It is the second point, however, with its emphasis on the way in which mystical experience leads to a sharing in the divinity of God, that seems particularly worth noting in the context of this conference. For what Burrows is describing here appears to be very much like what the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* has traditionally stressed, namely that in mystical experience we become, in some sense, like unto God. If we combine this point with Burrow's claim from the earlier passage concerning 'loving involvement', we have an appealing way, I think, of making sense of the idea of *theosis*. We share in the divinity of God to the extent that we become lovingly involved in God's life: more exactly, to the extent that we align ourselves with God's goals and concerns, or with God's will.

Many experiences of God, I suspect, only involve something like the stirrings of love. Or perhaps, a (second-order) desire to have (first-order) desires that align with God's. Most of us are therefore too self-involved, too invested in our own projects and concerns, to align ourselves with God's will in a dedicated way. Progress along these lines is arguably what both growth in the mystical life, and the process of *theosis*, ultimately involves.

V. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

I have been making a case that ordinary Christians can directly experience God, and that this experience deserves to be called ‘mystical’ because it contains an element of personal communion or involvement with God, one which can grow over time. Indeed, as far as I can see not only can ordinary Christians experience God in this way, but many do – thus making Christianity more than a dead letter, a mere philosophy, for many believers.

The question remains, however, as to why ordinary Christians would overwhelmingly reject the title ‘mystic’. And if we are inclined to agree that most ordinary Christians are not mystics, does this not mean that they also fail to have mystical experiences?

To my mind, the last inference does not follow. In other words, even if we are inclined to agree that most ordinary Christians are not mystics, it does not follow that most ordinary Christians fail to have mystical experiences. Losing the double-negative, and putting things more positively: even if we agree that most ordinary Christians are not mystics, it remains a possibility that many ordinary Christians in fact *enjoy* mystical experiences. For consider: most ordinary people would presumably reject the title ‘philosopher’, even though they might very well reflect on their life in a recognizably ‘philosophical’ way. And similarly: many ordinary people might reject the title ‘singer’, even though they sing throughout the day. Many might reject the title ‘athlete’, even though they enjoy playing sports. Many might reject the title ‘poet’, even though they enjoy writing poems. And so on.

What seems to be happening in all of these cases is that even though there is a continuum of possible degrees of seriousness or excellence across these dimensions, we tend to reserve the official title (‘mystic’, ‘philosopher’, ‘singer’, ‘athlete’, etc.) for those at the ‘far end’ of the spectrum. In other words, for those who are involved in these areas in a particularly dedicated or systematic or ‘professional’ way.

Even though most ordinary Christians would refuse the term ‘mystic’, we should therefore be open to the possibility that many are in fact engaging with God in a way that deserves to be called mystical, because of the way in which these experiences involve an element of direct encounter and union with God, as described above.

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