

Drawing from Mysticism in Monotheistic Religious Traditions To Inform Profound and Transformative Learning

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to introduce the processes and practices of mysticism found within the monotheistic traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in an attempt to identify areas where these might inform, elaborate, and deepen our understanding of profound and transformative learning theory and practice.

Keywords: monotheism, mysticism, profound learning, transformative learning theory

“Mysticism has been called ‘the great spiritual current which goes through all religions.’”
~Annemarie Schimmel (2011, p. 4)

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the processes and practices of mysticism within the monotheistic understandings of mysticism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in an attempt to identify areas where these might inform, elaborate, and deepen our understanding of profound and transformative learning theory and practice. This article will briefly propose: 1) connections between mysticism, profound and transformative learning; and 2) examine the underpinnings of mysticism as both an experience and a process to inform transformational and profound learning theory. For this initial discussion, we have primarily drawn from some of the key texts and thinkers which have interpreted mysticism from the perspectives of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

By examining mysticism through three examples from monotheistic religions, this paper suggests that mysticism as an experience and process is strongly linked with profound and transformational learning and could be used to unpack ideas of transformative learning and also to help explicate the relationship of profound learning to transformative learning. This is highly relevant to adult education; by theorizing the relationship between mysticism and these theoretical learning perspectives, this prefaces a more in-depth investigation into previously unconsidered and unique understandings of the deep and substantive learning that can inform the development of adult and lifelong education theory and practice.

Mysticism has been extensively studied and written about (Egan, 1984; Kushner, 2001; McGinn, 1991, 2006; Scholem, 1995; Shah, 1969; Underhill, 1999). It has a rich history in a variety of spiritual traditions including Christianity, Shamanism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and others (Teasdale, 1999), spanning centuries. Mysticism, which has had varied definitions, today is generally considered to be the development of a direct relationship between a person and the divine. James (1997) said that “In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness” (p. 419).

Transformative learning, arguably the predominant contemporary adult learning theory, has been around a relatively short time, beginning in the late 1990's. Transformative learning theory, first introduced in the late 1970's (Mezirow, 1978) was elaborated over the next decade into a more comprehensive theory (Mezirow, 1991), and continues to be the focus of robust research and development, as demonstrated through the publication of a handbook (Taylor & Cranton, 2012) and the *Journal of Transformative Education*, conferences, and more. Transformative learning theory is a change theory, about how “taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mindsets)..[become] more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7). Hoggan (2016), taking a thoughtful look at how the now extensive scholarship could be considered, offered a metatheory of transformative learning, explaining it as “processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world” (p. 71). Further, he suggested depth, breadth, and relative stability as three criteria required to define learning as transformative. Without these, he says, learning outcomes cannot be considered transformative.

Profound learning has been even more recently conceptualized, and it is at the very earliest stages of development. Profound learning revolves around rich, deep, durable, and meaningful experiences, and recognizes that people can learn and cultivate these kinds of experiences. Theoretically, these qualities can become a learning disposition, developed over time through practices. Profound learning emphasizes depth of growth occurring over a lifetime through both transformative change-experiences that result in new perspectives and intentional ongoing explorations that seek ongoing deepening through practices or disciplines.

Mysticism is an experience and a process (Teasdale, 1999). The marks of a mystical experience, according to James (1997), are that it is ineffable, noetic, transient, and passive. In other words, it cannot be explained, gives great insight into truth, cannot be sustained for long, and holds the individual in its power. A mystical experience appears to have at least some qualities of the epiphanal transformation Mezirow (2000) referred to as “epochal” (p. 21). Once an individual has had a mystical experience, they may continue to move intentionally toward a relationship with the Absolute through a process which has been described as purgation, illumination, and unification (James, 1997), with associated practices, most notably contemplation and prayer.

Mystical experiences “are frequently only the surface manifestation of a deeper, permanent part of life that slowly transforms the mystic’s entire being and consciousness” (Egan, 1984, p. 7). This process may last a lifetime. It becomes, moreover, “a way of living” (Egan, 1984, p. 7) and what Underhill views as a “complete system of life”. Mysticism *as a process* seems to align with the steps taken in transformative learning, and thus unpacking the nature of mysticism could provide a deeper understanding of transformative learning theory. Mysticism *as a practice* seems to align with the agentic, intentional nature of profound learning disciplines which move an individual into deeper realms of learning over a lifetime (Carr-Chellman & Kroth, 2017; Kroth & Carr-Chellman, 2018). Together, these two perspectives of learning, transformative and profound, like mysticism, begin to expand our understanding of learning as an ongoing, holistic, process of formation, experienced in the present moment (de Caussade, 1982).

The Necessity of a Phenomenological Framework

From traditional epistemological perspectives, especially those remaining most influential in the philosophy of science and the foundations of social research, it is difficult to take mysticism seriously as a phenomenon worthy of exploration in terms of its relevance for learning. A useful approach to characterizing this traditional epistemological perspective is through the process of human perception. Perception gets us in touch with the world and, hence, is foundational to much of our knowledge (Gibson, 1959). The representational epistemological approach measures the accuracy of one's perception on its ability to truly represent the external world, enabling us to, for example, walk without tripping. On this view, perception must generate accurate epistemic contact with the world outside the perceiver's skin, producing objective knowledge about the experienced, external world, and grounded in a dualistic ontology with a sharp distinction between subject/object and knower/known (van Dijk et al., 2018). Since epistemic contact with mystical experience is idiosyncratic and not easily controlled or repeated, these experiences are easily dismissed within this traditional representational epistemological approach. Mystical experience can be studied as relevant to human learning, however, from a phenomenological perspective.

The phenomenological perspective doesn't reject the efficacy of dualistic representational epistemology. Rather, it rejects the privileging of epistemic contact as the primary foundation of accurate knowledge. Rejecting this privilege, phenomenology embraces a relational epistemology grounded in a non-dualistic ontology. Experience is misrepresented when it ignores the essential relational aspect of the epistemic encounter between subject and object. Experience is synthetic, temporal, and interpretive, and neither the knowing subject nor the known object “. . . holds its identity simply present within itself alone. . .” (Russon 2003, p. 18). Epistemic contact producing accurate representation is one aspect of knowing, but not the only aspect. The phenomenological perspective highlights individual subjectivity as prior to and partially constituent of the nature of the object. In this way, phenomena disregarded by traditional epistemological perspectives become deeply significant.

Defining Mysticism

Many theologians and philosophers throughout history have tried to capture the definition of mysticism (Jantzen, 1989; Borchert, 1994). While the mystical experience is dependent on the mystics' personal experience, traditions and environments, and their religion or backgrounds that play a role in shaping their mystical experiences (constructivists), many scholars, like essentialists, maintain that there is a common core in all the mystical experiences regardless of its external form (Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2008). Thus, mysticism can be described in terms of the perceptions of mystics of various religions as they go into the deep heart of mysticism and what they describe is a universal movement of the heart that could also go beyond any religious tradition (Teasdale, 1999). In that sense, mysticism is not one phenomenon, but multiple phenomena with several dimensions based on the various religions and experiences one undergoes. McGinn (1991) the great chronicler of the history of western Christian mysticism, avoids defining it, claiming “any simple definition of such a complex and controversial phenomenon seems utopian” (p. xv). Instead, he shares his understanding of what it means in three parts, “mysticism as a part or element of religion; mysticism as a process or way of life;

and mysticism as an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God” (p. xvi). Similarly, while we acknowledge the complexity of defining or boxing mysticism into one definition, we will try to define mysticism in relation to its dimensions described by many theologians and philosophers in broader terms of the mystical experiences and practices.

An Experience and a Process

“We can also distinguish between mysticism as an experience and mysticism as a process of spiritual life. The former is very common, while the latter requires an ongoing commitment, regardless of the tradition”

~ Wayne Teasdale (1999, p. 22)

Mysticism is holistic and can encompass the entirety of an individual. Tuttle emphasized that mysticism is more than one-time, or several experiences. “It is the character of the mystic to emphasize progression; holiness is achieved only through the perpetual acquisition of knowledge” (Tuttle, 1989, p. 23).

Dimensions of Mysticism

Mysticism as a part of religion. Mysticism, McGinn says, typically exists within the container of, and is a part of, a larger religion. “No mystics”, he says, “(at least before the present century) believed in or practiced ‘mysticism’. They believed in and practiced Christianity (or Judaism, or Islam, or Hinduism), that is, religions that contained mystical elements as part of a wider historical whole” (p. xvi). Similarly, Teasdale (1999), explains that mysticism is experienced based on one’s religion, “mysticism means direct, immediate experience of ultimate reality. For Christians, it is union and communion with God. For Buddhists, it is a realization of enlightenment” (p.20).

Mysticism as an experience to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God.

Mysticism is described as occurring when consciousness becomes transformed into the idea of deep knowing—being in a state where one has a direct experience with the divine truth, with God, being in the presence of God and so it is disclosing an extra sensory dimension of reality. It is, perhaps, like knowing before words, about what is unspeakable that no words can explain. Mystical experiences are ineffable, beyond words, and are unique to the experiencer. In other words, it is a human experience that could be a transformational state of consciousness or an awakened mind. Mystical knowledge of God is experiential knowledge of God that is not simply textbook knowledge or seminary phrases one is taught but is something one experiences. Therefore, this phenomenon is not something merely to think about but also something to be encountered. When the phenomenon of mysticism occurs, the experience is found to be mysterious, awesome, urgent, and fascinating, with a sense of ecstasy. However, the experience is thought to be short-lasting, feels immensely meaningful and profound, and shatters some of one’s preconceptions, but it is episodic.

Mysticism as a process or way of life. As a process or a way of life, mysticism not only includes the goal of meeting and developing a relationship with the Absolute, but also everything

that leads up to that and continues afterwards. Union, or absorption into God, is less descriptive of that relationship for most mystics and mystical experiences than the word “presence”. For example, preparing for, being conscious of, and reacting to “what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God” (McGinn, 1991, xvii) is the “mystical element” (McGinn, 1991, p. xvii) in Christianity. Here, mysticism is considered not only as an experience but as a process of episodic mystical experiences, and the mystical relationship could be achieved through practices exercised over time. It is, in this sense, a process of self-transformation that requires commitment. It passes through stages and could embody experiences that entail love and suffering and profound learning.

From the perspective and container of whatever religious tradition it is in, mysticism could be considered as the path of deep interior life—as an experience or process—that leads one to establish awakening or becoming one with the divine, in the presence of God or losing oneself and become one with one’s surrounding or outside world or with all reality, with the divine. One’s sense of individuality transcends, leading to a kind of human transformation.

Next Steps

Breaking down the processes and qualities of mystical learning for purposes of analysis will be necessary to fully bring mysticism to bear on transformative learning and profound learning. It is worth noting that the classic steps of mystical awakening are only one way to regard what occurs. As Starr (2019) says, for example, “Contemplative life flows in a circular pattern: awe provokes introspection, which invokes awe” (p. 9). As in transformative learning, mysticism involves a process of change. Sometimes this begins with a “disorienting dilemma” and sometimes it is the result of years of practicing contemplation. This interaction between transformation (sporadic) and formation (continual, disciplined work) represents the relationship of transformative learning to profound learning.

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