

Spaces for the Mystical: A Reflective Essay

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Abstract: This reflective essay explores the tension between rationalism and mysticism in spiritual care, focusing on the Enlightenment and its impact. Drawing on Hindu traditions, evolutionary cosmology, and personal experience, it explores reclaiming mystical ways of knowing—intuition, embodied wisdom, and direct encounter with the Divine to better honor and respect those seeking spiritual care because of mystical experiences. By honoring multidimensional spirituality, validating non-linear journeys, and creating supportive spaces, the essay envisions holistic care that integrates science and mysticism, affirming mystery as essential to human flourishing.

Keywords: mysticism, enlightenment, evolutionary cosmology, embodied wisdom, direct encounter

I came to this essay reflecting on my own personal experience including over six years of experience providing spiritual care in academic settings. I have been observing for the past year that the way we offer contemporary care has been shaped by historical moments and dominant narratives of what counts as “Truth.” One such moment was the Enlightenment, when reason, science, and rationality became guiding lights of Western civilization. These principles have brought extraordinary progress in scientific discovery, medicine, and technology. These principles also have carried a shadow.¹ In the rush to elevate logic and evidence, other ways of knowing have been pushed aside. The mystical – which I define by direct experience of the Divine, heightened intuition, and embodied wisdom - became suspect, relegated to superstition or dismissed as irrational in ways that continue to show up today.²

The tension between rationalism and mysticism is not just a philosophical debate for me. I have seen it structure the decision to honor the dreamer. It shapes how we care for hearts and souls, how we listen to those who encounter the Divine in ways that cannot be measured or replicated. It structures whether we respect the spiritual care seeker who meets ancestors in visions, or whether we diagnose them as disordered or disoriented. It identifies whether we see mystics as bearers of wisdom, or as anomalies to be corrected.

In this reflective essay, I want to expand our thinking beyond this tension, drawing upon my own journey of decolonizing my practice of Hinduism and recent engagement with evolutionary cosmology – the view that the universe itself develops through natural, gradual, and

¹ Stephen Gaukroger, “The Enlightenment Revolt Against Rationalism,” *The Australian Review of Public Affairs*, November 2005, <http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2005/11/gaukroger.html>.

² Dean Radin, *Real Magic: Ancient Wisdom, Modern Science, and a Guide to the Secret Power of the Universe* (New York: Harmony Books, 2018).

transformative processes analogous to biological evolution.³ I'd like us to imagine together how we might reclaim spaces for the mystical in our own time. This is not just about Hinduism, nor just about history.⁴ It is about the multidimensionality of humanity, and the possibility of expanding spiritual care to honor those whose lives are touched by mystery beyond the rational.

Learning from Early Emissaries of the Mystical to the West

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, two teachers of Hinduism—Swami Vivekananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, and Swami Yogananda, a disciple of Swami Sri Yukteswar Giri—came to the West to share the wisdom of their traditions. For me and other students of their schools of thought, their mission was not to argue against science, but to share the mystical heart of Hinduism. They spoke of meditation, of union with the Divine, of enlightenment as embodied experience, within frameworks of science, i.e. the “Science of Yoga”.

They were emissaries of a tradition that integrates rational thought and mystical insight. They reminded the West that faith is not only about doctrines but about direct encounter, and science could be applied to the exploration of the inner world. Their presence was a counter-narrative to the Enlightenment's reductionism, a reminder that human beings are more than minds, they are bodies, spirits, hearts.

And yet, from the time when the British occupied India to the time when Swami Vivekananda and Swami Yogananda came to the West,⁵ Hinduism was intellectually reshaped to be integrated into Western hierarchies. Mysticism, with its emphasis on direct experience of the Divine, was often marginalized. Rationalism that demanded evidence, reproducibility, and universal laws, was prioritized. Mysticism offered intuition, personal encounter, and ineffable union. The two were cast as opposites: rationalism as serious, mysticism as suspect.

I have found this dichotomy false in my own life. Mysticism is not the enemy of reason. It is emergent, holistic, and deeply prophetic, and it can embrace rational inquiry as part of its quest for unity. Mystical knowledge is not irrational—it is trans-rational.⁶ It moves beyond the limits

³ Evolutionary cosmology is my preferred term to refer a web of related concepts from philosophy, physics, metaphysics, systems theory, and consciousness studies. There isn't a single canonical list, but there are other recognizable terms that scholars, theorists, and practitioners tend to use when referencing this phenomenon, including but not limited to: Noetics, cosmic, transpersonal or unitive consciousness, quantum entanglement, Akashic field, and Noosphere.

⁴ As this is a reflective essay, I write from the personal, yet I want to acknowledge that there are many traditions that celebrate and practice the intuitive, mysterious, embodied, contemplative direct experience of the sacred but many not name themselves of their traditions as mystical, given scholarly and/or popular definitional barriers to claiming the term(s).

⁵ Deepak Lal, *The Hindu Equilibrium: India c.1500 B.C.–2000 A.D.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Sandeep Banerjee, “British Colonialism and Imperialism: Hinduism,” in *Oxford Bibliographies in Hinduism*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/>.

⁶ By trans-rational, I refer to modes of knowing or awareness that go beyond ordinary rational thought without rejecting it, thus integrating intuition, insight, and higher-order meaning rather than falling below reason into the irrational.

of logic without discarding its value. As thinkers like John Horgan have suggested, mystical experiences can yield insights that complement, even transcend, what science discovers.⁷

The tragedy, for me, in providing contemporary care is that by privileging rationalism, we risk losing balance and nuance. Truth is not only deduced but also revealed; not only proven but also experienced. The legacy of Swami Vivekananda and Swami Yogananda, among others, invites us to ask: how might we, today, reclaim the mystical dimensions of faith in contemporary care? How might we expand spiritual care to honor those whose experiences defy linear progression, whose journeys unfold like blooming lotuses rather than straight lines?

The Contemporary Need of Spaces for Care of Mystics

In chaplaincy, therapy, coaching, and spiritual direction, we often rely on models shaped by rationalism. We turn to frameworks to diagnose, categorize, and measure. We often look for progress that can be charted. But what happens when someone's experience does not fit the chart?

Consider the person who dreams of ancestors and feels their guidance. In a rationalist frame, this might be labeled psychosis. But in a mystical frame, it is communion. Consider the seeker who experiences ego death in meditation. Rationalism might call it suicidal ideation. Mysticism calls it transformation.

If we only use rationalist models, we risk misinterpreting, even harming, those whose experiences are mystical. We need frameworks that honor the multidimensionality of human spirituality. We need care that validates experience, not just progress. We need spaces where mystics are not pathologized but welcomed.

One promising framework is evolutionary cosmology. Thinkers like Thomas Berry, Ilia Delio, Brian Swimme, and Beatrice Bruteau have woven together science and spirituality into a vision of the universe as dynamic, interconnected, and infused with Divine presence.⁸ Drawing on concepts from Hinduism to articulate a cosmology where all things are in communion, they speak of a universe evolving toward greater consciousness.⁹

Evolutionary cosmology, for me, dissolves the false dichotomy - it does not pit rationalism against mysticism. It integrates them. It says: yes, science reveals laws and processes, and mysticism reveals meaning and connection. Together, they offer a holistic vision.

In terms of moving towards best practices for spiritual care, this can mean we support mystics not by dismissing their experiences, but by situating them within a larger story of cosmic communion. It suggests that we can help people see their personal growth as part of the

⁷ John Horgan, *Rational Mysticism: Spirituality Meets Science in the Search for Enlightenment* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

⁸ Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of Love* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

⁹ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

evolution of collective consciousness. It offers that we can cultivate awe, reverence, and compassion as central to healing.

How, then, might we practically create spaces for the spiritual care of mystics? Four insights emerge from my studies and experience:

1. Reclaim ways of knowing beyond rational thought.

Mystics often live from the heart rather than the mind. They find truth in beauty, creativity, laughter, love. Spiritual care can be called to honor these ways of knowing. It can celebrate inspiration, kindness, peace, and move us beyond analysis and the written word.

2. Validate experience over linear progress.

Mystical journeys are not straight lines. They unfold like lotuses, layer by layer. Our methods of providing spiritual care can more intentionally respect the unfolding of these mystical journeys. Personalized guidance, mentorship, contemplative practices, all can support the unique paths of mystics.¹⁰

3. Embrace holistic interfaith community.

Mystics can draw from multiple traditions. Spiritual care can be called to be integrative, honoring diverse influences and addressing physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs. Practices like yoga, energy healing, mindfulness, and community sharing can provide support honoring individuality. The concept of emergence does not ignore components, it just doesn't reduce itself to those components, instead honoring that the sum of parts can be synergistic and more.

4. Invest in resources and sacred spaces.

Mystics can benefit from access to texts, teachings, techniques, and sanctuaries as much as anyone. They are often highly sensitive and deeply affected by their surroundings. Providing spaces of safety and solitude is essential. Spaces of sanctuary are important for spiritual development.¹¹

Conclusion

What does all this mean for us, here and now? I respond to two main questions you might be holding to conclude this reflective essay.

First, how am I acknowledging that we live in a world saturated with technology, where even spirituality is sometimes mediated by devices—apps, wearables, brain stimulation?¹² These tools can be helpful, but alone they risk turning the journey into an experiment. Mysticism reminds us

¹⁰ B. S. Naschak, *The Global Mystical Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023).

¹¹ Preeta Banerjee, Sheron Fraser-Burgess, and Anya Phillips Thomas, "Beyond Resistance: Building, Making and Creating Sanctuary," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 39 (2023).

¹² Wesley J. Wildman and Kate J. Stockly, *Spirit Tech: The Brave New World of Consciousness Hacking and Enlightenment Engineering* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2021).

that faith is participatory. It is not controlled but we surrender to it.¹³ It is not engineered but encountered.

Second, how am I building on the history of the Enlightenment that gave us a particular type of reason, but it also gave us a bias against mystery? While maybe not giving us answers, expansion of our spiritual care methods can honor and respect those whose experiences defy categories. We can integrate evolutionary cosmology to see ourselves as part of a sacred, evolving universe. We can create spaces of sanctuary, guidance, community, and beauty. To reclaim the mystical is to reclaim our humanity. It is to remember that we are not only thinkers but feelers, not only analyzers but lovers, not only rational but relational. It is to remember that the Divine is not only proven but experienced.¹⁴

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¹³ Pravina Rodrigues, *A Śākta Method for Comparative Theology: Upside Down, Inside Out* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2024)..

¹⁴Preeta M. Banerjee, "Being Experienced by and Experiencing the Divine: An Interplay of Womanist and Shakta Traditions," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 41 (2024): 62–70.