AN ESSAY ON “MYSTICISM” by Paul EL DAR.

During the 20th century numerous authors have written books on the subject of “mysticism”. Many universities and theological colleges also offer courses on this subject.

I propose, in the first instance to examine the etymology of the word.

From Chambers Dictionary of Etymology we learn the following:

MYSTIC (ADJECTIVE) occult, secret, arcane. Before 1382 “mystike”
Spiritually symbolic, in the Wycliffe Bible.

MYSTICAL (ADJECTIVE) About 1471 “mystical” enigmatic, obscure, symbolic.
The meaning of having a spiritual significance or value is first recorded in Sir Thomas Moore’s “Supplycacyon of Soulys” 1529.

MYSTICISM (NOUN) beliefs of mystics. 1736 formed from English “mystic adj. and n. + “-ism”

-ISM (SUFFIX) distinctive doctrine, theory, system or practice. 1680 noun use of the suffix –ism, found in words such as Puritanism, Quakerism, Calvinism, and (since the 1920’s) Communism, Capitalism, Socialism etc.

The concise Oxford Dictionary has the following:

MYSTIC (NOUN) A Person who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain unity or identity with or absorption into the Deity or the ultimate reality or who believe in the spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond the understanding.

MYSTIC (ADJECTIVE) 1. mysterious and awe-inspiring 2. spiritually allegorical or symbolic 3. occult, esoteric 4. of hidden meaning.

-ISM (SUFFIX) Meanings 2 &3 apply as follows:
2. a system, principle or ideological movement
3. a state or quality.

If, for the sake of comparison, we look at 2 subjects taught at universities, that is medicine and engineering, what do we find? Two very clear things: Firstly an agreed body of knowledge accepted by all practitioners; Secondly a body of practitioners of that knowledge. Nothing of the kind can be found in relation to the word “mysticism”. So how was this word and subject arrived at?

It was arrived at by an arbitrary process of abstraction by thinkers who decided that certain spiritual historical persons had something in common. This is a pure invention. Consider: Does St Bernard of Clairvaux really have anything in common with Jacob Boehme? Or St John of the cross, with the author, (Russian), of “The Way of the Pilgrim”? Obviously not, for the simple reason that each of the people mentioned was a product of a tradition, that would not recognise the other traditions. There simply is no communality, no system, no common ideology.

The situation worsens when we turn to the Middle East, or Asia. To apply any of the forms of the root “mystic” in those areas is a clear case of ethnocentrism. Most of the languages involved do not have an equivalent word. They have their own words for advanced spiritual experiences, and we should not “colonise” them by superimposing our, to them alien, terminology.
The reality is quite different. We distinguish a number of major spiritual families, each one of which sub-divides into a number of quite distinct (often opposed) groups. Each family, and each group within that family, has its own conception of advanced or perfect states and experiences.

Almost without exception great figures, described as mystics were the products and members of a specific tradition, to which they considered themselves loyal. Swedenborg and Meister Eckhardt have little or nothing in common, apart from being spiritual giants.

Obviously, within spiritual traditions of every kind, there is the possibility of having what Abraham Maslow called “peak experiences”. Studying these can be very profitable, but the sum total of them does not legitimise a subject called “mysticism”. If people want to continue to use the term they should at least be aware that it is an arbitrary abstraction that does not have a definable external referent.

The reading list for courses will usually rely heavily on books entitled “mysticism” (i.e. Underhill, Happgold) While these books are in many ways excellent, for a student starting from scratch they are very misleading. I would recommend the following initial reading list:

1. Shamanism – Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy by Mircea Eliade. This is a classic anthropological work giving a wealth of detailed information about the spirituality of tribal people.
2. The Idea of the Holy by Rudolf Otto. This is a modern, philosophical exploration of the phenomenon of the holy.
3. The Varieties of Religious Experience by William James. This is an honest, objective appraisal of religious experience over a wide spectrum.

Having laid some sort of foundation with the above works it is good now to turn to some anthologies:

1. Essential Sacred Writings from around the world by Mircea Eliade
2. Cosmic Consciousness by R.M. Bucke
3. The Perennial Philosophy by Aldous Huxley.

Once these 6 works have been studied one can read authors like Underhill or Happgold with profit, as they do contain a lot of pertinent information.

At this point it will also be helpful to start reading the life stories of great spiritual figures, western or eastern. There are any number of good biographies of St Francis of Assisi, and there is the “Autobiography of a Yogi” by Paramahansa Yogananda. A little research will find many others. From the life-stories of great spiritual figures much can be learnt that will not appear in didactic works.
Very little of what is written about this topic is anywhere near expressing its reality. Selected people in a variety of traditions have special experiences. For the Christian tradition these experiences are self-restrictive. This is very clearly expressed by St Paul in II Corinthians 12:4 “But I do know that I was caught up into paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be told” The meaning of the Greek here is twofold: 1. ineffable, inexpressible 2) not permitted to be expressed. The greater majority of westerners that have this kind of experience also strongly feel this injunction and act accordingly. Emanuel Swedenborg is a notable exception, as was Hildegard of Bingen.

The materialist world (which includes some “religious” people) regards these experiences either as the product of a fertile imagination, or as hallucinations associated with some clinical condition. While both scenarios are possible and occur regularly, it is a profound mistake to think they are the only explanations. There are such things as genuine mystical experiences, which can and do take many different forms.

In the Roman Catholic sphere, professional contemplatives generally have a spiritual director. This person may be, but does not need to be, the confessor, nor does such a person have to be a priest or of male gender. This is less frequent in the protestant world, but not unknown. Any spiritual director carries a heavy burden of responsibility, and needs to have sensitivity, empathy, and specialised knowledge. Most priests, pastors, doctors and psychologists are not suited for this role. The difficulties mystics have experienced in this area can be searched out by reading detailed biographies of their lives. In every area of this topic a great deal of common sense, prudence and wisdom is required, in order not to drift into dangerous courses.

While theology and biblical studies are relatively uniform, organised, rationally pursued and presented, the same cannot be said (and cannot be achieved) in this area. Arising out of very different, specific traditions in a totally subjective, individualised way, this topic presents difficulties and problems not encountered elsewhere in the religious domain. To subject the topic to some sort of psychological, rational sleight of hand is a very grave mistake, with possible negative consequences.

I want to record that I have written this essay reluctantly, after reflecting for 18 months on a situation that has arisen in a teaching area. The ideas expressed are based on 60 years of research in the area, and yet I would caution any reader about agreeing with them without research and reflection of their own. In this area every interested person should verify ideas for themselves, and not just take someone else’s word for anything. Prayer and meditation are invaluable aids in this enterprise.

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Postscript

What is supposed to be a subject, but at present is not, that is “Mysticism” entails a considerable number of questions that to date have either not been addressed or have been tackled in a way that by no means enjoys general agreement. Among these are the following:

1) On what criteria can we consider someone to have been a mystic: Visions? Miracles? Prophecies? Sanctity? Writings? Healing?

2) Neither Moses, Buddha, Jesus, or Muhammad appear to have considered any path other than their own as true and valid. Therefore, on what basis can we consider some Jews (Kabbalists) Buddhists (arahats, bodhisattvas) Christians (contemplatives, saints) Muslims (Sufis) to belong to the one category of “mystics”? 

3) Do some people who consider some members of various spiritual traditions to be “mystics” in fact constitute an altogether new separate spiritual tradition? If so, on what theological framework do they base their position?

4) Many mystics were denounced, persecuted or even executed at the behest of a majority of their own co-religionists. What does this tell us about the relationship between religious practice and mystical experience? Can and should this opposition be stopped and if so, how?

5) Some western mystics are clearly theocentric, while others are christocentric. What is the difference? Can they be reconciled? Does it matter? What does it tell us?

6) Can western Christian ecumenicism be extended globally to cover all religions? If this is possible, what form should it take? Are proponents of this just mavericks or heralds of what is to come?

7) Is anybody really prepared to make the funds available and to engage suitable people to do the research and creative thought obviously necessary to answer these questions satisfactorily?