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# The Impact of Mystical Experiences on Christian Maturity

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Writing in his Varieties of Religious Experience William James says, "That prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof - be that spirit 'God' or 'law' - is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world" (James, 1902/1990, p.435). The intention behind this project was to explore some of these "effects" of mystical experiences of which James wrote and in particular to investigate whether the effects of the "work done" resulted in greater levels of Christian maturity.

## Assessing Christian Maturity

While originally developed to study the relationship between religiousness and racial prejudice, the Religious Orientation Scale (ROS) (Allport & Ross, 1967), has been used to study the relationship between religiousness and a wide range of religious and psychological variables (Donahue, 1985). Allport's concept of intrinsic (I) and extrinsic (E) religious orientation, as measured by the ROS has often been regarded and used as a measure of Christian maturity. Despite its wide utilization, the I/E concept has also received significant critiques and challenges on both theoretical and psychometric grounds (Kirkpatrick & Hood, 1990). Of particular concern is an adequate understanding of the I and E orientations. In general, intrinsic orientation was intended to indicate mature religion, a sincere living of one's religion as a master motive for life, whereas extrinsic orientation was an immature expression of religion, a utilitarian, selfish motivation for religious involvement. Hence, according to Allport and Ross (1967), the intrinsic person "lives" their religion while the extrinsic person "uses" their religion. Allport also described the extrinsic motivation as a turning to God without a turning away from self. The research has tended to show that the extrinsic orientation is related to that which gives religion a bad name (Donahue, 1985), - prejudice, dogmatism, fear of death, low self-esteem, poorer psychological functioning. The intrinsic orientation is generally unrelated to these variables and appears to measure the strength of commitment to one's beliefs. However its great weakness is that it does not account for the content of the beliefs and the strong commitment to "immature" beliefs can create paradoxical results.

## The Nature of Mystical Experiences

The contemporary interest in the empirical research of mysticism can be traced to Stace's (Stace, 1960) demarcation of the phenomenological characteristics of mystical experiences (Hood, 1975). In Stace's conceptualization, mystical experiences had five characteristics (Hood, 1985, p.176):

1. The mystical experience is noetic. The person having the experience perceives it as a valid source of knowledge and not just a subjective experience.

2. The mystical experience is ineffable, it cannot simply be described in words.
3. The mystical experience is holy. While this is the religious aspect of the experience it is not necessarily expressed in any particular theological terms.
4. The mystical experience is profound yet enjoyable and characterized by positive affect.
5. The mystical experience is paradoxical. It defies logic.

Further analysis of reported mystical experiences suggest that the one essential feature of mysticism is an experience of unity (Hood, 1985). The experience of unity involves a process of ego loss and is generally expressed in one of three ways (Hood, 1976a). The ego is absorbed into that which transcends it, or an inward process by which the ego gains pure awareness of self, or a combination of the two. This latter is described by James, "In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness" (James, 1902/1990, p.378).

Using Stace's criteria of ego loss, unity, inner subjectivity, timelessness, noetic quality, ineffability, positive affect, and the holy, Hood developed an operational measure of mystical experience called the Mysticism Scale (M scale) (Hood, 1975). The M scale is a 32 item paper-and-pencil test that yields two highly correlated factors associated with mysticism which are considered to be two aspects of an overall concept of mysticism. Factor I has items dealing with the minimal phenomenological experience whereas Factor II deals with religious interpretation or attributions regarding the experience.

The relationship between church attendance and mysticism is complex. James (1902/1990) contended that religious institutions tend to inhibit people from having mystical experiences. Personally religious people reported more mystical experiences than the equally personal and institutionally religious, and the institutionally religious reported the least (Hood, 1973). However, frequent church attenders and nonattenders report more mystical experiences than infrequent attenders (Hood, 1976b). Similarly, Poloma and Pendleton's (1991) study of prayer experiences showed that rote or mechanical prayers are more likely to be associated with feelings of sadness, loneliness, tension, and fear, whereas, meditative prayer is related positively to feelings of existential well-being and religious satisfaction. When combined with the data on intrinsic religious orientation and church participation, the results affirm the fact that intense religious experiences such as religious mysticism occur in the lives of the religiously devout and are not restricted to the non church attenders (Hood, 1976b). From an attributional perspective, reports of mystical experiences by non religious persons

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predominantly focus on the minimal phenomenological criteria of such experiences whereas the religious person may make such experiences "religious" by virtue of their interpretation of them as religious (Hood et al., 1990). Without an attributional system from which to understand the experience, mystical experiences have little consequence for the person. Within the attributional system of a church, people can interpret their mystical experiences and as interpreted they may become significant life transforming events (Hood, 1985).

### Present Study

In light of the current debate on the use of the ROS, this study explored the assumption that it assesses Christian maturity, prior to its use in a study of the effects of mystical experiences. Seventy-two Episcopal church leaders at the 1991 National Episcopal Convention, held in Phoenix, rated the items of The Age Universal Religious Orientation Scale (Gorsuch & Venable, 1983) and the Mysticism Scale (Hood, 1975) as to whether they represented a mature or immature expression of the Christian faith. The Intrinsic/Extrinsic (I/E)-Revised scale (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989), a derivation of the Age Universal Scale, and the Mysticism Scale were then used to assess the impact of mystical experiences on Christian maturity in three Episcopal parishes (N = 248). In addition a purely behavioral scale of church related activity was also used to assess Christian maturity. It had a five-point scale ranging from infrequent church attendance to regular attendance and service in parish programs.

The results suggest that the intrinsic scale of the I/E-Revised scale is an approximate measure of one aspect of Christian maturity. It appears to assess the extent to which individuals allow their beliefs to impact all aspects of their lives. This scale was also found to relate positively and substantially to the Mysticism scale scores ( $r = .37$ ,  $p < .0001$ ) and a behavioral scale ( $r = .38$ ,  $p < .0001$ ) that assessed persons' level of involvement in church worship and service to others. However, mysticism scores were essentially unrelated to the level of involvement in church activities. The study concluded that there was no consistent pattern of church related activity following mystical experiences. In addition to providing a language and means for people to interpret their mystical experiences, the church appears to need a variety of means by which these experiences can be translated, beyond a mere commitment to beliefs, into the fulfillment of service to others.

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