

# What Does Mysticism Have to Do with Politics?

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*“At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be indefinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable.” (Henry David Thoreau, from Walden)*

*“The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.” (Oscar Wilde, from The Picture of Dorian Gray)*

*“[T]he quest for truth is ultimately penultimate. In the quest, reality is experienced as the mysterious movement of an It-reality through thing-reality toward a Beyond of things.” (Eric Voegelin, from In Search of Order)*

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## Introduction

To tackle the question at hand, whether mysticism has anything to do with politics, some preliminaries are obviously essential: we must know what we are talking about, and thus define our key terms.

I suggest we define mysticism, for the purposes of this discussion, as a body of belief(s) centering on the possibility of an immediate and direct communion with the divine or the spiritual through specific forms of rituals or experiences. It must be noted that mystical experiences are not accessible to anyone at all times. But the results of or insights gathered from such experiences can be conveyed to others, even if the essence of the experience remains mystic (by which I mean to a certain extent unpronounceable or obscure, or in some sense sublime).

I suggest we define politics as the ordering and governing of the affairs of the public realm, including (but not limited to) the creation of laws, institutions, and offices, and also including, for the purposes of our discussion, the underlying philosophy and anthropology defining the aim and limits of political power and the rights and duties of individuals and institutions.

Based on this – and even admitting political philosophy as a proper part of politics – how can two realms of human activity and thought have so little to do with each other as mysticism and politics? Notice, our task is not to discuss the relationship between *religion or spirituality* in general on the one hand and politics on the other. That is a relationship which opens up for a number of connecting points, since the thought and activities of religious bodies are rife with political implications, including the vexing question of where we put the line between religious power and political power.

Mysticism, on the other hand, seems to have little to do with power, and even less with the organization of the often mundane and everyday

affairs of human beings. The mystic, as often (even if inaccurately) conceived of, is more of a recluse, drawing away from rather than engaging with the world. The underlying philosophy of the mystic is, it seems, not political but deeply metaphysical and often isolated from the rest of society in both nature and practice.

I will in the following suggest three possible relationships between mysticism and politics, and see how each of them throws light on the underlying question that Eric Voegelin helps us raise: namely, if man's search for truth, properly speaking, is grounded in a relationship to the whole that is, in its essence, *mystical* and not immanent to the human condition, how can we fashion a true politics that serves the common good of human beings, if we do *not* appreciate that mystic dimension? Indeed, if we remove the mystic dimension from politics, is a politics of truth even possible?

### **Rawls, Public Reason, and the Mystical**

A skeptical attitude toward the role of mysticism, based on ideals of liberal democracy, can be expressed with the aid of political philosopher John Rawls and his concept of public reason. As summarized by Leif Wenar, "public reason requires citizens to be able to justify their political decisions to one another using publicly available values and standards".<sup>1</sup> Rawls relates this to what he calls the duty of reciprocity in a society based on the idea of the equal dignity of its citizens. This ideal does not mean that all have to agree in order for anything to be done; nor does it mean that all

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<sup>1</sup> Leif Wenar (2008), «John Rawls», *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rawls/#PubRea>).

publicly understandable ideas can potentially form a part of public reason (thus opening up for any and all kinds of politics, even the most brutally ideological one, as long as it is formed in the spirit of public reason). Rawls' point is neither to reach consensus on all issues, nor to build public debates on a smallest-common-denominator form of moral relativism that in given contexts may turn out to be both narrow and immoral. His point is rather that *public action and debate require public reason(s)*, in the sense of arguments and reasons open to public scrutiny. If, for instance, I argue in favor of a certain taxation system, and base my opinions *exclusively* on a religious doctrine which everyone cannot be expected to share, I am violating the ideal of public reason. But I can still argue for that taxation system – or against abortion rights, or in favor of religious schools, for that matter: I just have to do it in a language and with reasons not exclusively tied to something which not everyone can have access to and argue about.

This sounds simpler than it is. Is a concept of human rights, based on widely available and agreed-upon documents and traditions, part of public reason? On the one hand, the answer is obviously yes, given the widespread acceptance of the view, expressed by the UN Declaration of 1948, that each individual human being has certain rights. But we know that this idea was seen as novel and controversial within our own culture just a few centuries ago, and that several cultures around the world claim to find it a dubious teaching, formed and tainted by European and Western ideology. If that is so, can, say, a political action plan or legislation based on (arguably metaphysical) human-rights arguments rightly belong within “public reason”?

We can, however, leave that question aside here for the purposes of this paper, although it is important to keep it in mind when we use the term “public reason”, since it shows that the dividing line between the political and the metaphysical – so important to Rawls – is not clear-cut. The verdict from public reason on statements based on a highly personal and intuitive experience of a mystical nature seems either way to be clear: such experiences are, almost per definition, not available to all, they are not open to public scrutiny and debate, and thus they cannot be expressed in a language and form acceptable to public reason.

This first approach would therefore seem to rule out mystical experiences or mysticism as a body of teaching playing a direct role in shaping politics. Individuals engaged in politics could of course find themselves deeply animated by such experiences, but from the point of view of the ideal of public reason, such inspiration would have to be brought into the open for everyone to see and evaluate, and its actual contents would have to be explained in publicly understandable words and concepts. Mystical experiences or teachings *per se* would have a hard time qualifying as public reason.

Interestingly, in evaluating the religious faith of individuals running for public office, we often see the same challenge appearing, with prejudice and misunderstanding often being claimed to be an impediment for being accepted by the larger public (especially if one belongs to a religious movement outside the mainstream), therefore creating a motivation for office-seekers to invoke the separation of church and state, of religion and politics, and thus to avoid scrutiny of what could seem to outsiders

“strange” and “mysterious”. Striking the balance here, between the public’s legitimate right to know what inspires and forms the political world-view of a candidate for public office – whether that inspiration be mystical or not – and the *prima facie* right of the candidate not to be subjected to public scrutiny of what is arguably a personal affair, is indeed one of the several challenges of the idea of public reason.

But still, we are left with the main conclusion that mysticism and public reason make for an uneasy combination, if they can be combined at all. According to such a view, the political role of mysticism must be a limited and indirect one.

### **The Idea of a “Nocturnal Council”**

A very different approach to our question could be imagined: We could hold that persons who have had mystical experiences, or who can in some other way plausibly be called mystics, have insights that we sorely need in politics. Being above the fray of the often contentious yet mundane daily matters of tax brackets, highway construction, defense policies, and elections, they can attend to the matters of the world in a different way, overseeing the workings of society with a view to the common good and higher truth.

The obvious liberal-democratic reaction to such a construct, somewhat reminiscent of the Nocturnal Council which Plato proposes in books 10 and 12 of the *Laws*, can be divided in two: first, the fear of a concentration of power (shared by Plato in the same work, although interestingly not in the context of the Council), and second, the fear that

the membership of such a group would be arbitrary, opening up for charlatans and would-be dictators with little care for the common good or the affairs of state. The Nocturnal Council, as envisioned by Plato, would avoid the second danger by relatively strict designations for membership, based on positions in society and actual experience rather than anything intuitively or subjectively defined. Still, the first danger persists, and the entrance requirements into the categories creating eligibility for such a Council could be hotly contested even if they were clearly specified.

Contemporary House-of-Lords or Upper-Chamber constructions within lawmaking bodies interestingly embody some of the same basic idea as the Nocturnal Council or similar “bodies of the elect”. Although the link to Mysticism or philosophical insight is weak, there is a belief that certain individuals, if they are given the right institutional setting and the time to reflect and contemplate, will represent a valuable check on the day-to-day workings of politics.

So is this a feasible inroad to understanding the political use of mysticism? The dangers delineated, most especially the fear of dangerous dream-world creators claiming an important role in institutional politics, is surely too large for us to contemplate such institutions populated by self-styled mystics today. However, the idea of institutions with more time for deliberation, different sorts of representatives than day-to-day politics fosters, and room for metaphysical discourse is not in itself ridiculous, although we would be careful today not to give such bodies lawmaking authority. If we instead have in mind what we customarily do in modern society when we appoint expert commissions and councils, and then add to

the composition of such groups specialists in questions spiritual and philosophical, we may come closer to a feasible idea of the political role of mystics and mysticism: As one (or a few) of many, taking part in specially designated tasks of great complexity, we could see people with a claim to having mystical experiences or a mystical world-view playing a fruitful and potentially important part in making the consultations in question more sensitive, dignified, and balanced. The actual selection of who would count as a “mystic”, and the institutional and tradition-based parameters for so being picked out, would still have to be settled; yet, this way of approaching the question arguably gives us more of a handle on a constructive and balanced relationship between mysticism and politics.

### **The *Virtues* of Mystics**

With the word “balanced” we reach the third potential relation between the mystical and the political. I have in mind what we could call the virtues of the mystics: the attitudes often expressed and qualities of mind fostered by such individuals. For Eric Voegelin, anything legitimately deserving the name of religious mysticism rather than the dream-world creation of Gnosticism would have to maintain what he calls a “balance of consciousness”.<sup>2</sup> Glenn Hughes puts it this way, with great relevance for our topic:

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<sup>2</sup> See especially chapter 4 of *Order and History vol. 4: The Ecumenic Age*; well treated in Glenn Hughes, “Balanced and Imbalanced Consciousness”, in Hughes (ed.), *The Politics of the Soul* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield).



The balance needing to be kept is an existential equilibrium in the face of two sorts of experience: on the one hand, experiences of worldly things, of their truth and reality and lastingness; on the other hand, experiences of human consciousness reaching toward and discovering a divine “beyond” as the ultimate source of worldly things.<sup>3</sup>

This, while related to the question of religious experience in general, and not only to mysticism in particular, reminds us indeed of what we might call the virtues that a mystical philosopher would need, and which are of deep relevance to the world of politics.

We may start with exactly this: *balance*, the need to resist the pull in only one direction of thought, and the willingness to place the life of human beings into a larger context. The enthusiasm of mass movements and totalitarian ideologies are opposed by the balance of consciousness of the genuine mystic: such mass movements carry human beings away from the tension of life in the world toward an unknowable ground of being in the direction of self-creation and immanent “truth” creation, and this is exactly what the balance of consciousness would counteract.

This leads us to another virtue of the mystic, very much called for in politics, namely, that of *humility*. The mystic, ideally speaking, receives insights transcending everyday human cognition, and thereby also learns of the limitations of the human realm. From the mystics, the realm of politics should take to heart a sense of what Eric Voegelin calls consciousness of life

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

in the *metaxy*, the in-between, where the tension towards transcendence always means that we can never fully grasp the whole; nor should we ever get immersed only in everyday affairs, but check our concerns against principles, experience, and even intuitions. This also means that our knowledge is always partial, and that the claim to exclusive truth needs to be tempered, not by relativism, but by the insight that our grasp of truth will never be complete.

Which leads us to the important factor of *intuition*; not the name of a virtue *per se*, but closely related to the moral-intellectual virtue of prudence, comprising the ability to trust one's insights into right and wrong, good and evil, based on experience, tradition, and an acute sense of what constitutes the deepest challenges of human life. Winston Churchill in 1940 to many represents such an intuitive form of leadership, based indeed on a deep-seated *intuition* – fueled by insight – into the kind of evil that Nazism represented. As Michael Burleigh has shown, based on several other biographical accounts, Churchill was not a traditional Christian believer; yet, he carried with him a religious reverence for decency, honesty, and honor, and a most virulent disdain for their opposites.<sup>4</sup> It is by no means reasonable to call Churchill a “mystic” in any traditional sense of the word. But he exemplifies a virtue typical of mysticism in the tradition of Meister Eckhart: a grasping of the moral order not by intellectual analysis alone, but through an intuitive grasping of divine presence in nature.

There is indeed a variety of virtues and attitudes expressed by the great Christian mystics, but one that comes across clearly to those who

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<sup>4</sup> See Michael Burleigh, *Moral Combat* (London: Harper Press, 2010), ch. 6.

read their works is a sense of *patience*: the insight that good things cannot always be realized here and now, and that the greatest perfection is not attainable on earth, but has to be awaited patiently, in hope of a life to come. The link between patience and *hope* is deep-seated in the Christian tradition and comes across with special clarity in mystical thought. Hope signifies a readiness for the union with the Good – or with God – in a state such as ours where the Good in its full sense is not present. The mystic, through intuition, senses this union, yet knows that human beings must patiently await its full realization.

All of these virtues are relevant to the political life, yet form a peculiar counterpoint to what we often associate with politics. With the exception of prudence, the virtues mentioned seem apolitical. Yet, they arguably infuse the world of politics with a sense of realism and resistance to deformation. In *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, Voegelin tersely yet lucidly analyzes the Nietzschean will to power (*libido dominandi*) as one of the wellsprings of ideological politics. Voegelin's analysis of Nietzsche shows that the essence of what Voegelin calls Gnosticism is a revolt against God. The virtues of humility, patience, and hope are thrown overboard, not because they are meaningless or untrue, but because they do not fit into the dynamics of the revolt: They have to be abandoned.<sup>5</sup>

Which brings us back to our starting-point: Mysticism and politics seem to represent two very different aspects of human life; yet the first has potential to correct and guide the second through a set of virtues and attitudes that throw valuable light on the nature of politics – and on the

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<sup>5</sup> See Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, [1968] 1977), part II.2.

nature of life as a mystery. We may believe that mysticism as such can play only a limited and indirect role in a modern political debate informed by public reason; and we may also believe that special political roles for mystics are, most often, more of a danger than a help to a modern democracy. But those observations must not allow us to forget the apolitical yet deeply political virtues of the mystics.