

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Rev. Charles Brock: *Mystics for Skeptics*



In his latest provocative "timely read", the Rev. Charles Brock tackles mystical thinking for the highly skeptical. Read on for a fascinating chart on the greatest mystics and a sampling of historically inspiring words.

– Pat Cuneo, Jefferson Publications Coordinator

“The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the power of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.”

– Albert Einstein

A working definition of mysticism is “a direct and transformative presence of God.”^[1] Mystics insist that this must be followed by good works as either by-product or its ultimate purpose. As William Blake wrote, “Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell, there God is dwelling too.”

From Jacob tangibly wrestling with God to Martin Luther King, Jr. struggling with human rights, the mystical variety through the centuries and in all nations is superb and enormous.

MYSTICS	BORN	METHOD	GOAL
1. Moses	Egypt	exodus/law	Holy nation
2. Lao-Tse	China	aphorisms	Balance
3. Buddha	India	contemplation	Oneness
4. Plato	Greece	ladder of love	True, Good, Beautiful
5. Jesus	Israel	parables	Kingdom of God
6. Muhammad	Arabia	verbum Dei	Holiness
7. Bernard of Clairvaux	France	allegory	Love of God
8. Francis of Assisi	Italy	stigmata	Imitation of Christ
9. Hafiz	Persia	jokes/poems	Splendor of God
10. Joan of Arc	France	visions/voices	Freedom
11. Teresa of Avila	Spain	arrow of love	Wed to Christ
12. Lincoln	America	politics	Equality
13. D.H. Lawrence	England	Native religion	Splendor of nature
14. Martin Buber	Austria	I-Thou	Union
15. Dalai Lama	Tibet	Meditation	Kindness
16. Conclusion	Jacob, Julia Ward Howe, and M.L. King, Jr.		Glory

- Albert Einstein deliberately and repeatedly expressed his general religious views.

But what were his views of mysticism? His statements on the subject were few, relatively obscure, and often misunderstood. A coherent answer requires setting those statements in historical, cultural, and theological context, as well as examining Einstein's philosophical and religious views. Though the Einstein who emerges clearly rejected supernatural mysticism, his views of “essential” mysticism were more nuanced, subtle, and ultimately more sympathetic than “mere appearance” suggests.

Einstein was not only a great scientist but a wise philosopher and a pragmatic “true mystic” ... “of a deeply religious nature.” (New York Times obituary, April 19, 1955)

“I am a deeply religious man,” Einstein wrote in *The World As I See It*. “I cannot conceive of a God who rewards and punishes his creatures, or has a will of the type of which we are conscious in ourselves. An individual who should survive his physical death is also beyond my comprehension, nor do I wish it otherwise; such notions are for the fears or absurd egoism of feeble souls. Enough for me the mystery of the eternity of life, and the inkling of the marvelous structure of reality, together with the

single-hearted endeavor to comprehend a portion, be it ever so tiny, of the reason that manifests itself in nature.”

“That which is impenetrable to us really exists. Behind the secrets of nature remains something subtle, intangible, and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend is my religion.”

“The finest emotion of which we are capable is the mystic emotion.”

“The most beautiful and profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their primitive forms – this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religion.”

- From Julia Ward Howe’s song lyrics in “Battle Hymn of the Republic” in 1861:

“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.

“I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps;
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps,
His day is marching on.

“I have read His fiery gospel writ in rows of burnished steel!
‘As ye deal with my contemners, so with you My grace shall deal!
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,’
Since God is marching on.

“He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat;
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him; be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.

“In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me;
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free!
While God is marching on.”

- Martin Luther King, Jr.’s words in his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech pull the ideas together:

“Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live – a long life; longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

[1] Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, Modern Library, 2006, p xiv. “God” has a wide definition here –Really Real; That Which Is, etc. God is not a being among other beings, no matter how powerful or grand. God is “being itself.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society’s Board of Trustees.

