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Intellectual Overexcitability in Mystical Lives

As a result of an examination of passages expressive of intellectual overexcitability found in autobiographies of late 19th- and 20th-century mystics (or aspiring mystics) I have found, in these cases at least, that intellectual overexcitability expresses itself either in terms of a need and/or in terms of a procedure for meeting that need. For both the need itself and for the procedure designed to satisfy the need I have observed three variant forms or types. The need is expressed in terms of either (1) a quest for meaning; (2) a preoccupation with an enigma; or (3) a general thirst for knowledge. The method adopted to satisfy the need varies from (1) book-reading; to (2) seeking out [spiritual] teachers or mentors; to (3) introspection.

In one case the quest for meaning is put in the following terms:

I did not always believe in God. I was not even interested in believing. But I did want with a terrible longing and restlessness, to find a meaning in life, a purpose behind it, a direction to for it. (Mayorga, 1981:1)

D.T. Suzuki, the famous scholar of Zen Buddhism, reports that some time after his father died (resulting in a loss of crucial support for his education and his search for a career), he engaged in the following reflections:

All this I lost, and by the time I was seventeen or eighteen those misfortunes made me start thinking about my karma. Why should I have these disadvantages at the very start of life? (Suzuki, 1986:3)

In this last instance, not only is the quest for meaning more personal, the quest for meaning comes very close to an attempt to solve an enigma.

The preoccupation with an enigma has many varieties. For example for Peace Pilgrim [who took it upon herself to make several trips, on foot, around North America to lecture on peace] it was a search to understand God:

When I was a senior in high school I began to make my search for God, but all my efforts were in an outward direction. I went about inquiring, "What is God? What is God?" I was most inquisitive and I asked many questions of many people, but I never received any answers! (Peace Pilgrim, 1991:1-2)

In another case it was dissatisfaction over the fact that "terror and destruction" were not accounted for in the forms of modern secular thought to which the aspiring mystic had been exposed:

An awareness of violent contradiction and paradox entered my imagination early and pervaded it. Western rationalizations or secular dreams of progress, however much I tried to share them, were always foreign to me, as were all versions of the Divine that left out terror and destruction. (Harvey, 1991:8)

My final example of fascination with an enigma, in this case a concern with the question of personal identity, comes from the autobiography of Paramahansa Yogananda, who was active in spreading Hindu teachings and practices in North America :

Shortly after my healing [at the age of eight] through the potency of the guru's picture, I had an influential spiritual vision. Sitting on my bed one morning, I fell into a deep reverie.

What is behind the darkness of closed eyes?" This probing thought came powerfully to my mind. (Yogananda, 1973:12)

In yet other cases the need that is expressive of intellectual overexcitability is simply stated as an intense desire for knowledge. The late 19th-century Catholic saint Thérèse Martin (better known as Thérèse of Lisieux) says that as a child

...I was gripped by an intense desire for learning. I wasn't satisfied with the lessons of Madame Papineau. I began working on my own at history and science. (Martin, 1957:64)

A Hindu man, Gopi Krishna, who experienced and wrote about his mystical (or kundalini) experiences relates that as his knowledge grew new questions kept arising in his mind:

I read avidly, my developing mind eager for satisfactory replies to the questions which cropped up as the result of my own survey of the narrow world in which I lived and the stray glimpses of the broader one of which I came to know more and more from the graphic accounts contained in the books. (Krishna, 1993:40)

Not only is the need described in this passage, but the means of satisfying it is also indicated—i.e., the reading of books.

Expressions of book reading as a method of quenching the thirst for knowledge or the solving of an enigma are frequently found in the personal narratives of mystics. Here is an example from Thérèse Martin, who in spite of her scruples regarding the moral contents (or lack thereof) of books, was an avid reader.

As I was no good at games, I would have been happy to spend all my time reading. Fortunately I was guided in my reading and given books which entertained me and also strengthened my mind and character...This love of reading lasted until I entered Carmel [i.e., became a Carmelite nun]. I read innumerable books, but God never allowed me to read one which might have harmed me. (Martin, 1957:48)

A 20th-century spiritual seeker describes her childhood love of reading as follows:

It seemed that there was never a time when I was not reading, and for quite some time before this (perhaps a couple of years) I had been reading whatever came to hand, but I was most interested in the books on philosophy, religion and various esoteric subjects which I found on my mother's bookshelves. (Starr, 1991:5-6)

Book reading as an effort to fulfill the desire to unravel the mysteries of life is a commonly chosen means, but there are others. For aspiring mystics recourse to more knowledgeable persons in the form of spiritual teachers or mentors is an option often undertaken at the adolescent-to-adulthood turning point. Andrew Cohen, who had read Yoganada's autobiography and books by Gopi Krishna, says that as a young adult he sought out spiritual teachers.

During this period I would go to meet many spiritual teachers that passed through town. I was curious and wanted to know and learn as much as I could. I met and spent time with several swamis, a Hasidic rabbi, a Sufi master, a Zen master and even went to visit Christian faith healers. I wanted to know what was real and what was true. (Cohen, 1992:16)

This same method was adopted by D.T. Suzuki as well. In spite of his initial lack of success, the adolescent Suzuki persisted:

My thoughts then started to turn to philosophy and religion, and as my family belonged to the Rinzai sect of Zen it was natural that I should look to Zen for some of the answers to my problems. I remember going to the Rinzai temple where my family was registered—it was the smallest Rinzai temple in Kanazawa—and asking the priest there about Zen. Like many Zen priests in country temples in those days he did not know very much....

About that time a new teacher came to my school. He taught mathematics...But he was also interested in Zen...He did his best to make his students interested in Zen, too, and distributed printed copies of Hakuin Zenshi's work *Orategama* [letters written by the Zen-master Hakuin to his disciples]...I could not understand much of it, but somehow it interested me so much that in order to find out more about it I decided to visit a Zen master... (Suzuki, 1986:3-5)

As a result of the last-mentioned visit, Suzuki began a personal journey of study, meditation and spiritual growth and eventually a career as a professional interpreter of Zen.

The final type of response to the inner need for knowledge is that of introspection. An example of this method is described by Peace Pilgrim. Since she could find no one to answer her question, "What is God?" she chose to look within herself in a congenial setting.

I went about inquiring, "What is God? What is God?" I was most inquisitive and I asked many questions of many people, but I never received any answers! However, I was not about to give up. Intellectually I could not find God on the outside, so I tried another approach. I took a long walk with my dog and pondered deeply upon the question. (Peace Pilgrim, 1991:1-2)

An examination of expressions of intellectual overexcitability in mystical lives reveals a basic pattern—there is a curiosity, inquisitiveness, even a compulsion, to gain knowledge, to understand life, to solve enigmas. Corresponding to this desire or need are the various means or methods undertaken by mystics to gain the desired knowledge. The pattern is simple enough but both parts have many variations, a few of which have been identified in this analysis.

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