

Excerpt from the OERP Book: Mysteries

By Gary Stanfield. Originally published in *Windlandes Sagu*, Issue 25, pages 9-14.

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to clarify what we are talking about in the *OERP Book*. We are not just talking about an alphabet. Instead, we are contemplating how at least some of the ancient Teutonic peoples handled something shared by all religions. All of the topics discussed in this essay are dealt with directly or indirectly in the *Old English Rune Poem*.

The contemplation of mysteries is at the heart of all esoteric religion, but the study of mysteries is itself something of a mystery. There is very little said about religious mystery, even in courses for beginners in runic studies. Sometimes one can see experienced religious people making mistakes in their approaches to religious mysteries. So, although the topic may seem a little basic, some discussion might be useful.

Religious mysteries have two basic characteristics that differentiate them from secular mysteries. (1) religious mysteries are experienced *emotionally* at least as much as they are known *intellectually*. (2) Religious mysteries are permanently enduring. The two types of mystery may coexist. A phenomenon can present both empirical and religious mysteries. A couple of examples: the enduringly awesome and marvelous in wonders of nature or acts of human love. We can feel these mysteries emotionally even if we find the phenomena pretty understandable empirically, and even if we think we are not religious.

Epistemology

We know of religious mysteries both emotionally and intellectually, but they are really more emotional than intellectual. This is why religious mysteries are so often spoken of in art or in puzzles as opposed to expository prose or tables of data.

We call these things “mysteries” because they are complex and not fully perceptible, although there is an identifying unity to a religious mystery. Each

of us may have a slightly different understanding of such a mystery because none of us will see the whole at one time. Also, we cannot combine our perceptions fully. For example, there is an identifying unity to the emotional perception of childbirth or human speech, but the spiritual perception is mysterious. Although we know a lot about the mechanics of human speech or childbirth, these phenomena offer us feelings that we might describe as magical.

Religious mysteries are most accessible to us in meditative states. Often one is only attuned to religious mystery for a small part of the time that one is in meditation. At exceptional times, one can concentrate on a religious mystery for hours but usually not with a constant level of intensity. However, sometimes one can become aware of religious mystery without making any special effort. A long period of frequent meditations or formal studies can occur with only infrequent and minor insights resulting, and then an inspiration occurs on awakening of a morning or while driving on a long highway.

Not everyone can knowingly perceive religious mysteries. Those who cannot perceive religious mysteries may be intelligent, honest, hard-working, and friendly. They are not necessarily bad people. However, they often think we are just pretending or deluded. Often, people grow into the ability to perceive religious mysteries. Personally, I think back to when I was in my twenties and an atheistic graduate student in a social science. I thought of all hidden realities as things to be investigated, explained, and published out of their misery. I was irritated by the Catholics' mention in their public rituals of mysteries that defied explanation. How naive I was!

You can feel the emotional difference between the two types of mysteries. Empirical mysteries can give one a certain appealing unease (curiosity) to the extent that one likes to have matters understood. But religious mysteries have a weird and uncomfortable or thrilling and awesome aspect. Everyone who experiences religious mysteries feels both the attraction and repulsion, but usually one emotional reaction is a lot stronger than the other. Therefore, religious mysteries beckon to some and frighten others away.

An example might help tie this section together. One does not need to be a consciously religious person to look at a clear sky on a moonless night and find feelings of joy and wonder. It is not that we lack astronomical knowledge and are overcome with superstitious fear. Quite the contrary, for astronomical knowledge brings some of us more in touch with the emotional experience. One reason some people engage in full-time empirical study of astronomical

phenomena is the passion that drives their fascination. Although many seem numb to the biggest of shows, for others the magic is in the emotion they feel. The emotion cannot be fully expressed in words; it must be experienced to be known.

Endurance

Religious mysteries never lose their existence nor emotional power, even under the most intense study. Because we know these mysteries primarily emotionally, they are not subject to solution by comprehensive theoretical modeling, as are many empirical mysteries.

This is quite unlike secular, or empirical mysteries. Empirical mysteries are temporary because they can be reduced to elimination by examining scientific (or less precise) data in public discussion. One's objective in studying empirical mysteries is to eliminate them and perhaps to discover other empirical mysteries to study in turn.

This means that "disenchantment of the world" is a fallacy from an esoteric religious point of view. Scientific explanation and a general turn toward cause-and-effect thinking can decrease the value of superstitions and discourage the exoterically religious. However, awakening awareness does not necessarily turn a person away from esoteric study and celebration of religious mystery.

Organization

"Rune" denotes mystery, and a runic system is one way of organizing our study of the overarching religious mystery. Therefore, it might seem plausible that the *Old English Rune Poem* tells us that there are twenty-nine religious mysteries. Such an inference would be based on an illusion, and this would be the same kind of illusion that would have one infer that the first stanza is about money.

In a sense, there is only one religious mystery. Our studies of this are remindful of the parable of the blind men and the elephant. When we contemplate the magic of childbirth or of human speech, the unity we contemplate is incomplete in the same sense that an elephant's left foreleg is incomplete. We focus on particulars partly because they are interesting in themselves. We also focus on them because focusing on a part or submystery is easier than trying to

contemplate the one-mystery as a whole. Of course at times one will contemplate the mystery of religious mystery per se or the one-mystery.

Thus, any approach to mysticism must cope with two aspects of the phenomenon. On the one hand, there is a raw, ultimate simplicity. On the other hand, there is a vast myriad of complexities and subdivisions within subdivisions.

Biblical, Hindu, Teutonic Pagan, and other systems have different ways of handling this matter. For example, consider the matter of the one-mystery. The Taoists call the one-mystery Tao, but add that Tao is both something manifest that we can name and something beyond naming. Thus, Taoists distinguish the mystery of religious mystery (Tao) and the ultimate, overarching mystery (which cannot be named). On the other hand to at least some monotheists, that whole has an identifying unity – they call it “God”. Thus, Christians and Moslems tend to posit that life is just and that a conscious being controls the cosmos with beneficent intentions for all people. At least some Hindus also see the one-mystery as God (Krishna).

Ancient Germanic Pagans saw the one-mystery as beyond any conscious control, and they did not name the one-mystery. “Futhark” and “futhorc” are modern inventions. The alleged goddess “Runa” (who you may hear about in the Rune-Gild) is derived from one person’s intuition in modern times. Wodan is said to be the King of Asgard, but He is not a good administrative ruler, for He is “king” in the same sense that Elvis Presley is the King of Rock and Roll. Wodan is a (or the) paramount exemplar. (See also Stanfield, 2000e for a discussion of *wyrd*). (The challenge to this interpretation is in the OERP strophe “Ös”, and others may interpret this strophe differently than does the present author).

Thus, we find a variety of internally consistent approaches to studying religious mysteries and to perceiving the one religious mystery. If you wish to practice esoteric religion, you should choose whichever of these approaches is most comfortable for you. Be cautious about saying that someone else’s approach to religious mystery is “wrong”. Enlightened people do not worry that someone else is using an esoteric system with which they are personally uncomfortable.

Values

There are three values that help reward the study of religious mysteries. Meditations on such matters should be emotionally gratifying, help with our

own character building, and provide intellectual expansion. Ultimately, the motivation is a sense of insecurity and urgency that derives from awareness of a meta-soul. The present author refers to this practice of religion as progressive mysticism.

EMOTIONAL GRATIFICATION

Since our means of knowing the mystical is more emotional than intellectual, then it stands to reason that a major portion of our gains would be emotional. And the emotions can be quite a mix: the emotional experience can be weird and uncomfortable and strange or thrilling and awesome — or any combination of these.

Mystical enlightenment must have its emotional downs to be complete. Failing to find the disturbing, shocking, disappointing — or the awesome — is failing to find some of the major aspects of the mystical. Somewhere in anyone's contemplation there should be fear, wonder, joy, loneliness, sorrow, humility, etc. Often an experience will include a wondrous mixture of emotions.

Mostly though, the study of religious mystery should be fun. A major reason for emotional gratification is to satisfy a shared, inner consciousness, which is concerned with profound spiritual growth. Normally we attain euphoria at least briefly while meditating upon the mystical. After most meditations, there should be satisfaction or joy. Moreover, one should experience a long-run tendency to become more at peace internally. This is partly because improved character and awareness make us better-adjusted people in society.

CHARACTER BUILDING

Study of religious mysteries should help in a process of continual enlightenment. Enlightenment as a process consists of improvements in broad awareness, self-consciousness, rationality, self-control, and acceptance of responsibility. It is not human to attain an absolute perfection of enlightenment as a condition, so there is no end to the process of enlightenment.

Study of religious mysteries should help in one's enlightenment. One way it helps is that the meditations should tend to produce insights. Sometimes, you will break psychological barriers that prevented you from perceiving. Also, literature on religious mysteries tends to be oriented toward attainment of profound wisdom. Examples would be *The Old English Rune Poem*, *Tao Teh*

Ching, and *I Ching*. Of course, attainment of a calmer, more secure bearing per se is an improvement in character.

INTELLECTUAL EXPANSION

Systematic study of religious mysteries should produce a sense of understanding. Also, the student of religious mysteries expects to get realizations that are not available to the less mature.

Study

INTELLECTUAL SOURCES

The use of ancient materials is commonly a prominent part of any study of religious mysteries. If these things endure examination, if they are made more apparent by examination, then often it is the terms of discourse rather than the substance that makes ancient texts seem alien. And ancient texts are often based on hundreds or thousands of years of work by many persons.

Works that seem new may have value. Some of them are poor or dishonest scholarship, simply presenting ancient wisdom as if the writer or speaker thought of it all himself or herself. Some of them, in limited ways, are insightful. And certainly, moral conditions have progressed over the centuries. For example, it was formerly common for conquerors to kill all the men, enslave all the women and children, and take all the moveable property of a nation they defeated in battle. Thus in Numbers 31, the Bible says that — as a religious duty — the Israelites were to kill all of the Midianites except for female virgins, who were to be kept as slaves. Nowadays such behavior is generally considered sick at best and is strongly repudiated by most Biblical fundamentalists.

However there is just no sense in trying to reinvent the wheel. Ancient works tend to be much more profound than works that seem strictly modern. Some specimens of ancient literature are free of the unenlightened (and pseudo-religious) attitudes that burdened their own times. Most of the ancient works mentioned by name in this appendix are free of illegitimate content. Poetic composition seems to be a good sign. Some pieces of ancient literature, such as the rune poems, pack an enormous amount of thought-provoking and insightful

material into a small amount of space and will make us aware of things we would never think of on our own nor in conversation with close associates.

Although coaching can be very helpful, one cannot afford to depend strictly on a guru or other personal leader. Going to good ancient sources helps one discriminate between what the Old English would call *lár oððe léaspelling* (one the one hand lore and on the other hand empty or misleading verbiage). Many examples could be cited from various religions.

Ancient materials are often densely packed and require close study for full exploitation. For example, certain Buddhist literature make extensive use of paradoxes or of juxtapositions of opposites, and ancient wisdom poems commonly present us with puzzles and contradictions. The *Old English Rune Poem* is a prime example of this practice, although it presents these juxtapositions primarily to those who reflect more deeply on its content and style. The *Old Norwegian Rune Rhyme* and the *Tao Teh Ching* are examples that more openly present paradoxes and strange juxtapositions. If you are ready, you can find a fascinating emotional experience in meditating upon the contrasts presented in such sources.

These pieces of literature look strange partly because they are attempting to use words to get at something that is not fully accessible with words. Also, they are using puzzles to get around human psychological defenses and to clue us in to a need to think more deeply than normal. Of course some ancient literature looks strange partly because it comes from cultural context that is relatively alien to one's own.

METHODS

Experts have found means of meditating upon the mysteries, of using them for divination, or of using transformative personal progress to achieve extraordinary results in daily life or in extraordinary situations. Everything said about those methods in this book is in the analyses of the stanzas.

Summary

Religious mysteries differ from empirical mysteries in that the epistemology of religious mysteries is much more emotional and intuitive than is the epistemology of empirical mysteries. The mystical endures all inquiry, retaining its mysteriousness and emotional impact forever; while empirical

mysteries can be eliminated. Religious mysteries are emotionally more powerful than are empirical mysteries. A phenomenon may present both religious and empirical mystery, or (like childbirth) it may present only a very powerful religious mystery.

The contemplation of religious mysteries is undertaken in a variety of internally consistent systems of symbols and policies. Even so, many people cannot engage in mystical practice. Enlightened people distinguish between systems they disagree with or fail to understand on the one hand, and on the other hand that which is unholy, atrocious, and religionist. It is common to fail to quite understand someone else's mystical system.

The study of religious mysteries is associated with a quest for wisdom and the satisfaction of a profound psychological drive state that is difficult to describe succinctly but is not caused by crude physical lacking. The drive is deeply seated and so difficult to define that we call it spiritual.

Meditation upon religious mysteries is most likely to be fruitful if one exploits ancient lore. This study is hard work.

General References

This chapter is based partly on personal experience and on conversations with practitioners of esoteric religions.

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(*The OERP Book* is a study of the *Old English Rune Poem*. Most of the chapters and appendices have been published in periodicals, but the study is still in progress as of this writing.)