

Simon Critchley

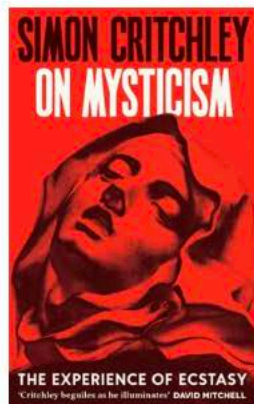
Philosopher

Few modern philosophers have done more to get their subject out of the lecture theatre and into people's lives than Simon Critchley.

He is the author of more than 20 books, with subjects ranging from David Bowie, humour, hair loss, and football; to suicide, Shakespeare, Heidegger, and Greek tragedy. His latest book is *On Mysticism: The Experience of Ecstasy*, published in October.

Critchley is the Hans Jonas Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York and, until 2021, was co-editor of the influential essay series 'The Stone' at *The New York Times*, which featured "the writing of contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless".

He is also a musician, performing in the self-styled "obscure music duo" Critchley & Simmons, and is a committed fan of Nick Cave, Iggy Pop, Julian Cope, and Liverpool Football Club. He also claims to know the lyrics to all of Al Green's hits.



What is the Author's Approach?

Mysticism is, as Critchley admits, not an obvious choice for a professional philosopher who has previously identified as an atheist. As he observes, "for the last couple of centuries, with obvious exceptions like Nietzsche and, more recently, Georges Bataille, philosophy has more or less successfully inoculated itself against the kind of experiences of ecstasy we find in the mystics. It is time to reintroduce the virus".

On Mysticism is his attempt to re-introduce the virus of ecstasy, a self-conscious attempt to right the balance in a discipline which "refuses to acknowledge vast swathes of human experience which are felt to be undeniably real but cannot defend themselves readily in the tribunal of reason".

It's also an act of retraction on his part. "Looking back, I find my earlier views on religion arrogant, elitist, and deeply dismissive of belief," he writes. "This book is my attempt to rethink this approach to religion by way of what I take to be its fiery core and beating heart: mysticism."

The book is divided into three parts. The first is concerned with attempting to pin down the slippery term itself, using 16 examples of his favourite Christian mystics, including Bernard of Clairvaux, Christina the Astonishing, Hadejwich of Antwerp, Henry Suso, and Meister Eckhart. He pins down seven adverbs that we need to employ if we are to glean mysticism's real meaning: we must think obliquely, autobiographically, vernacularly, performatively, practically, erotically, and ascetically.

The second section takes this definition and expands it through deep dives into the poetry of Anne Caron, TS Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and *Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich.

The book's final section examines the implications of mysticism for the study of philosophy – "mysticism lives on in the modern world as aesthetic experience" with passionate invocations of the contemporary music that Critchley loves, including the ecstasy-inducing work of Neul, Nick Cave, Julian Cope, and Brian Eno. He ends with a confession: "Modern philosophy has spent far too much time chewing flowers, and too little time watering them, cultivating them, watching them grow, and breeding new, strange, and gorgeous hybrids."



What's the Big Idea?

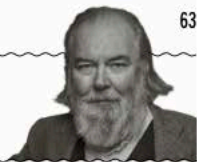
Readers of Critchley's previous books will be prepared for his wit and easy-going iconoclasm, his demotic swagger. All these are present in the arresting opening chapters of *On Mysticism*.

He opens with a definition of mysticism as "experience in its most intense form" and proceeds to make the reader an offer: "Wouldn't you like to have a taste of this intensity? Wouldn't you like to be lifted up and out of yourself into a sheer feeling of aliveness?"

His version of mysticism as ecstasy doesn't require drugs, fasting, seclusion, or altered states to happen (although all of these things might be useful on the journey). Critchley's mysticism is existential and practical. "It is – and this can serve as a rough and ready definition – the cultivation of practices which allow you to free yourself of your standard habits, your usual fancies and imaginings and see what is there and stand with what is there ecstatically," he writes.

Throughout the book, he stresses that mysticism isn't some private act – "the real test or warrant for the authenticity of a particular mystic's account of personal transformation: whether it is transformative for others. Its authority lies in its capacity to bring others in. Mysticism speaks to and indeed requires an audience, a receptive, interested, even devoted audience".

This is why he urges us to take mysticism seriously, "as a compelling phenomenon that poses a real challenge to the dominant modern picture that



PROFILES OF THE PEOPLE WHOSE IDEAS ARE HELPING TO SHAPE THE FUTURE

philosophy has painted for itself". Modern life is hard: leaden, heavy, "a time of dearth". Hence the need for ecstasy, which is "what it feels like to be alive when we push away the sadness that clings to us".

At the heart of *On Mysticism* there lies a challenge: "The pact that I would like to make with the reader of this book is to see if we can transform our misery, woe, and doubt with a wealth of words and sounds that might permit us to push back against the violent pressure of reality and allow a richness of life and a possible transfiguration of self and world. This is the possibility of ecstasy not as an altered state, but as this state intensified, elevated, deepened, released."

Which Notable Examples are Used?

Critchley confines himself to Christian mysticism to develop his argument and calls the 14th Century anchoress Julian of Norwich "the heroine" of his book.

In a lengthy and subtle exposition of her Showings, two separate written interpretations of the same mystical experience she had when she was 30-and-a-half (Critchley loves "that needless, gratuitous extra detail"), he explores her key insight that "love precedes creation" – so that, in order to receive divine love, we need to remove everything between ourselves and God: an act of "decreation" or "an unravelling of self" that she achieves, paradoxically, by writing.

As Critchley observes, "the form and the content of Julian's writing ceaselessly mirror, echo, and deepen one another" providing those who read her carefully with "a healing tonic against melancholia".

He is equally good on the strange and intense text *Holy the Firm* by the contemporary American writer Annie Dillard. The book opens with the beautiful but horrifying image of a moth flying into a candle as she reads. It becomes trapped in the wax, burning and sputtering there for two hours, until Dillard finally blows the candle out. For her, the immolated moth represents the true artist's need for self-sacrifice: "When the candle is burning, who looks at the wick?" Critchley takes this thought and runs with it: "To write, to try and craft meanings in words, even to philosophise in the right climate, is not to commit yourself to a search for happiness or even fulfilment. It is not fun. You are not serving some higher expressive

purpose nor are you giving shape to some transformative normative political vision. These are comforting careerist illusions. Rather, to write is to lead a non-life devoted to the possibility of fire, of being engulfed by flames."

In the final section of the book, he turns to music: "My intuition ... is that music, common, shared, everyday music, low or high or somewhere in between, is able, at its best, to describe how we feel and to allow us to feel something more."

Put more bluntly: "It is impossible to be an atheist when listening to the music that one loves." The music he really loves is Krautrock from the 1970s, and he makes a convincing case for its influence on the Punk explosion. "Punk should be fearless, amoral, born from a spirit of defiance, refusal, and the celebration of a vertiginous dizzying freedom," he writes. "With a fearless imagination and a dauntless, beautiful naivety, these songs open a space where we can push back against the pressure of reality."

What Reception has Their Work Received?

The book has been well and widely reviewed, already enlisting the endorsement of some big hitters.

In the *New Statesman*, Rowan Williams called it "a significant and courageous invitation to think again about the kinds of thinking that matter; the kinds of thinking that keep us awake". This theme of quiet subversion impresses the essayist Brian Dillon too: "*On Mysticism* is a lucid, genial guide to a body of writing that describes states of being, and intuitions, that belong and don't belong to the tradition in which its author finds himself."

The Times Literary Supplement stresses the book's high tolerance for the odder end of the experiential spectrum: "Insightful and imaginative ... remarkable ... [Critchley] hopes to instill a healthy dose of mystical weirdness in mainstream philosophy."

For the *Chicago Review of Books*, it is the book's range that impresses: "Critchley's inquiry spans centuries and sensibilities; it is ancient and fiercely contemporary; it is practical and existential; it is high and low."

Finally, *The Washington Post* detects the steel at its core: "If feeling the world's muchness is a gift, it's also a discipline, and *On Mysticism* shows just how hard a discipline it can be."

Why do these Ideas Matter?

On the face of it, a book focusing on a narrow vein of mostly Christian experience ought only to find a niche audience. The fact that Critchley opens the doors of his inquiry so wide, and makes his engagement with complex, even obscure, ideas so lively and vital is what makes the book remarkable. "One either feels mystical speech is saying something utterly important that cannot be said any other way, or one does not," he writes. "There is no middle ground."

Critchley makes mysticism exciting, even accessible, by linking it to the existential problems we all face. What is art for in the age of social media? How can we learn to listen to one another again?

Critchley doesn't offer simplistic answers but he does ask the right questions: "At this point in history, it is at least arguable that understanding is as important as critique, and patient, kind-hearted, sympathetic observation more helpful than endless personal opinions, as we live in a world entirely saturated by suspicion and fuelled by vicious judgements of each other."

He also has some profound things to say about why people refuse to give up on their religious practice: "What makes Christianity or any other faith valid and enduring is not the theoretical issue of the reality or otherwise of some metaphysical postulate like the existence of God, but the practices of devotion in which the participants of a religion engage."

Despite, or maybe because of his agnosticism, Critchley comes as close to accurately describing the paradox of religious faith as any book I've read.

And it's hard to quibble with his conclusion, which left this reader grinning: "This book harbours a deeply held wish to push against pervasive forms of melancholy and find something like peace, great rest, detachment, a released ecstatic existence, the possibility of being liberated from pain. This is what I called on the final page of the book "idiot glee": a sheer mad joy at the fact of the world".

John Mitchinson is a writer and publisher. He is the co-founder of Unbound, the world's leading crowdfunding platform for books, the co-host of the popular books podcast *Backlisted*, and a vice-president of the Hay Festival. He was a senior writer for BBC's *QI*