

JAMIA MILLIA ISLAMIA

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July 20, 2021

Press Release

JMI organizes Second Lecture of the Distinguished Lecture Series: Prof. Simon Critchley on “Pandemic Mysticism”

The Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia(JMI) organized the second lecture of the Distinguished Lecture Series, "Pandemic Mysticism" by Prof. Simon Critchley, Hans Jonas Professor of Philosophy, the New School for Social Research, on Friday, 16th July, 2021, at 7:30 PM IST on Zoom. Supported by the Scheme for Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration (SPARC), Ministry of Education, Government of India, the talk was organized as part of the ongoing academic collaboration with Department of English and American Studies, University of Würzburg, Germany, and promises to be one in a line of successively pertinent lectures.

The talk was conducted by Ms. Zahra Rizvi and Ms. Shraddha A. Singh, Ph.D. Scholars in the Department of English, JMI, and was enthusiastically attended by a large number of scholars, students, and faculty from all over the world and across various timezones.

Prof. Simi Malhotra, H.o.D., Department of English, JMI, Indian PI, delivered the welcome address, greeting the invited speaker, faculty, scholars, and students. She spoke about the talk as a part of the ongoing collaborative project between the Department of English, JMI and American Studies, University of Wuerzburg, on “New Terrains of Consciousness: Globalization, Sensory Environments and Local Cultures of Knowledge”, supported by the Ministry of Education’s initiative SPARC, which aims to facilitate academic and research collaboration between higher education institutes in India and abroad. She, then, introduced the esteemed speaker, Prof. Simon Critchley, who was greeted by a round of applause.

Prof. Simon Critchley talked about humanity’s ascetic-like experience at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and how he finds profound historical and religious resonances with the logic, poetics and practices of mysticism. The lecture invited one to dwell on the experiences of mysticism as found in Christianity in the West, and also suggested a revisioning of the positionality of conventional philosophic thought which is grounded in scepticism and critical thinking to one of understanding.

Through the lecture, Prof. Critchley also outlined the following seven adverbs to understand mysticism: Obliquely, Autobiographically, Vernacularly, Performatively, Practically, Erotically and Ascetically, and invited the audience to think on ‘pandemic mysticism’ through the context of these adverbs.

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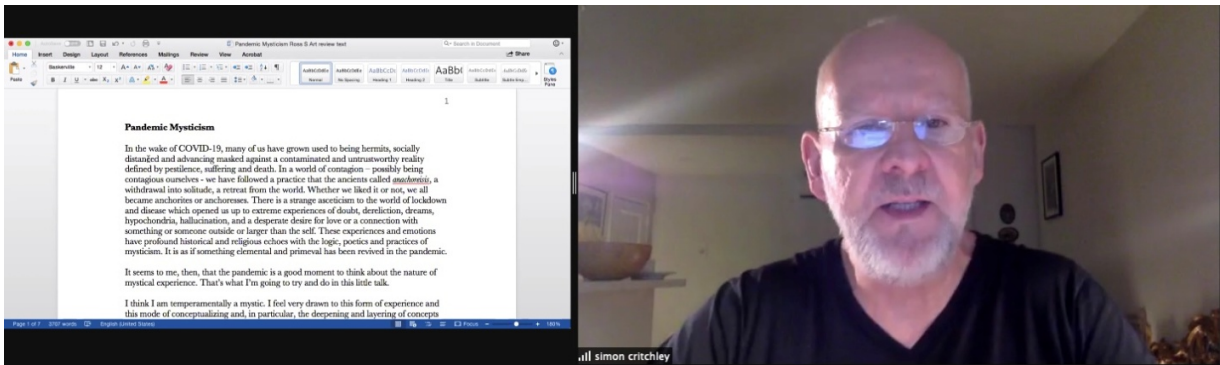
The lecture was followed by a participative, in-depth Q/A session coordinated by Ms. Ann Susan Aleyas, a Ph.D. Scholar in the Department of English, JMI.

The event was brought to an end with a Vote of Thanks by Ms. Zahra Rizvi. The audience was also invited to join the next talk in the Distinguished Lecture Series, to be delivered by Prof. Nancy Fraser on “The Covid Pandemic: A Perfect Storm of Capitalist Irrationality and Injustice” on 23rd July, 2021, 8:00-9:00 PM IST.

To ensure a wide range of viewership and participation, the event was also live streamed on YouTube, and was attended by over a hundred participants.

Public Relations Office
Jamia Millia Islamia





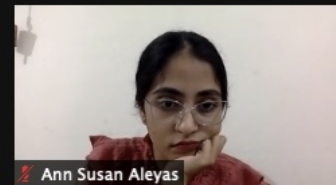
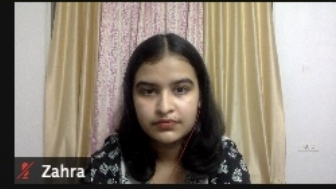
Pandemic Mysticism Ross S Art review text

Pandemic Mysticism

In the wake of COVID-19, many of us have grown used to being hermits, socially distanced and advancing masked against a contaminated and untrustworthy reality defined by pestilence, suffering and death. In a world of contagion – possibly being contagious ourselves - we have followed a practice that the ancients called *anachoritis*, a withdrawal into solitude, a retreat from the world. Whether we liked it or not, we all became anchorites or anchoresses. There is a strange asceticism to the world of lockdown and disease which opened us up to extreme experiences of doubt, dereliction, dreams, hypochondria, hallucination, and a desperate desire for love or a connection with something or someone outside or larger than the self. These experiences and emotions have profound historical and religious echoes with the logic, poetics and practices of mysticism. It is as if something elemental and primeval has been revived in the pandemic.

It seems to me, then, that the pandemic is a good moment to think about the nature of mystical experience. That's what I'm going to try and do in this little talk.

I think I am temperamentally a mystic. I feel very drawn to this form of experience and this mode of conceptualizing and, in particular, the deepening and layering of concepts



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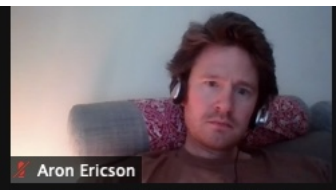
hypochondria, hallucination, and a desperate desire for love or a connection with something or someone outside or larger than the self. These experiences and emotions have profound historical and religious echoes with the logic, poetics and practices of mysticism. It is as if something elemental and primeval has been revived in the pandemic.

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I think I am temperamentally a mystic. I feel very drawn to this form of experience and this mode of conceptualizing and, in particular, the deepening and layering of concepts with experience and experience with concepts that can be seen in mystical traditions.

Because skepticism is not an instinctual or default response for me. If someone tells me something, I am inclined to believe it, no matter how strange it sounds. Maybe I'm just gullible, particularly when it comes to profound experiences that I have never really had, or never had in the way that I would really like. Maybe I'm just a bad philosopher. The thought has certainly crossed my mind.

For example, I believe that Julian of Norwich had 'showings' or revelations of Christ, that George Fox, founder of the Quakers was carried up to heaven, that William Blake was visited by Angels in his dark little dwelling off the Strand in London, that Wordsworth had a total sensuous apprehension of the divine in nature during his ascent of Mount



Pandemic Mysticism Ross & Art review text

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... autobiography, occurs with mystical writing. The 'I' in Julian of Norwich is the first 'I' of an Englishwoman. The second is Margery Kempe, a generation later than Julian (they met in 1415, Margery wanted the counsel of Dame Julian as she called her). The earliest women's lives we have are in many cases are the lives of the mystics. Sometimes, these lives will be written directly by the mystic, as with Julian, Marguerite Porrete or Teresa of Avila, sometimes they will be recorded by 'Brother Scribe', as with Angela of Foligno, Christina of Markyate, Christine the Astonishing and many others.

(Maybe talk about the 'Sister Katherine Treatise', from the 14thC as an example of the inversion of gendered authority in the Medieval period: the daughter becomes the father's teacher. And the same thing is true of the life of Henry Suso, which was written down by his 'spiritual daughter', Elisabeth Stagel. This was one of the most popular texts in the late Middle Ages in the German-speaking world)

This autobiographical tradition begins a lot earlier in a different mode with Saint Augustine where Augustine and his mother, Santa Monica, have a fleeting vision and reach out and touch what they see as the eternal wisdom of the Lord. This is the vision at Ostia in Book IX of the *Confessions*.

Importantly, if there is a discovery of the 'I' in mystical writing, then it is 'I as an other', as Rimbaud said. The I finds its voice and itself through its relation to the otherness of God. Maybe this is why autobiographies without God are so dull [the tyranny of memoir]

A grid of six video call participants. Each tile shows a person's video feed with their name at the bottom. The participants are: Simon Critchley (top left), Zahra (top right), Simi Malhotra (middle left), Ann Susan Aleyas (middle right), Aron Ericson (bottom left), and Anisur Rahman (bottom right). The bottom right tile also shows Shradha A. Singh and Zahid Zamri.