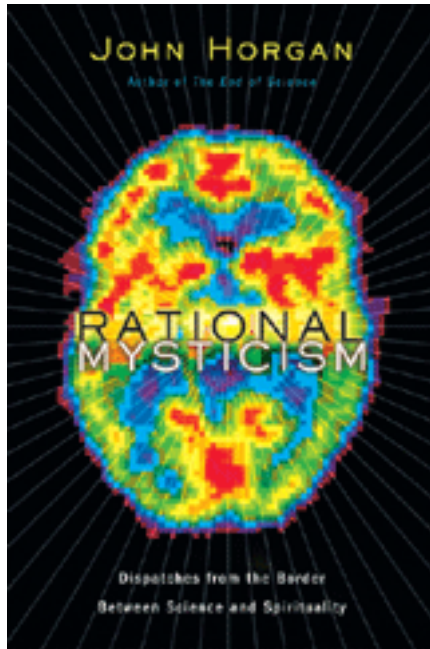


Press Release



Rational Mysticism

by John Horgan

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About the Book

Can one be both a seeker and a skeptic, a mystic *and* a rationalist? For many, merely suggesting that there is some relationship between science and religion is cause for argument. Leave it to John Horgan, the award-winning science writer and author of the groundbreaking bestseller *The End of Science*, to investigate this underexplored and controversial territory. In his new book, *Rational Mysticism: Dispatches from the Border Between Science and Spirituality* (Houghton Mifflin Company; January 22, 2003), Horgan chronicles the most advanced research into the mechanics and meaning of mystical experiences, seeking to narrow the gap between reason and mystical phenomena.

To begin, he poses questions whose answers can come only from exploring science and spirituality together:

How do trances, visions, prayer, and satori "work"? What can neuroscience, psychiatry, and other mind-related fields tell us about mystical states? Are there any risks in following the mystical path, whether by meditating or ingesting peyote? What is the link between mysticism, madness, and morality? What is the nature of the supreme mystical state sometimes called enlightenment? Can it provide genuine insights into why the universe exists and what its purpose and destiny might be? Can it tell us what happens to us when we die? What sort of truth can a rational mysticism give us, if any, and what sort of consolation?

Horgan searches for the answers to these questions in a manner all his own, by profiling the leading intellectual adventurers who are charting the growing intersection between science and the spiritual. He interviews Andrew Newberg, the radiologist whose search for the brain's "God module" was highlighted in a 2001 *Newsweek* cover story, and the psychologist Michael Persinger, who has created a device (called by him "the Octopus" and by others "the

God machine") that stimulates the brain, triggering religious and mystical visions. He talks to the Harvard-trained neurologist and Buddhist James Austin, who draws on his own heightened consciousness to explore the mechanics of enlightenment, and to Alexander Shulgin, the chemist who has synthesized more than two hundred mind-altering drugs (a substantial portion of which he has tested on himself).

Not only does Horgan reveal the startling findings of these and other researchers and thinkers, he also maps the burgeoning convergence between mysticism and chemistry, neurology, anthropology, physics, and other scientific fields. The result is a cavalcade of surprises: he uncovers the strikingly similar effects of "mystical technologies" as diverse as fasting, trance, dancing, prayer, and drug trips, and reports on the recent explosion in research on psychedelic drugs (and the exciting, unsettling notion that we may be closing in on a substance that can induce "instant enlightenment").

Although Horgan brings an intellectual rigor to the subject, he is no chilly, dispassionate observer. He recounts his own tortuous search for enlightenment—exhaustive, poignant, and sometimes surprisingly comic. He is a self-proclaimed seeker: open-minded, honest, endlessly curious, refreshingly approachable, and he never talks down to his reader. He is adventurous, enthusiastically getting his feet wet by being his own research subject. He fasts, he meditates, he has his brain tickled by the "God machine," he even takes ayahuasca, one of the strongest natural psychedelics.

Most books on mysticism, whether written by scientists, religious scholars, or New Age gurus, hew to a particular theory or theology. In *Rational Mysticism*, John Horgan has written a book as wide-ranging and open-minded as possible. Readers of all stripes will find this intrepid investigation bracing. Skeptics will admire the depth of Horgan's commitment to his inquiry, and seekers will identify strongly with his profound yearning for the ultimate truth. And readers of the sort who've flocked to that wonderful journey through America's fringe—or who want to take a singular tour of an odd, fascinating corner of our culture—will find this book a fabulous trip.

Ten Tough Questions Tackled by *Rational Mysticism*

1. Is eating a mushroom a more absurd route to God than kundalini yoga or flagellation or the study of Kabala? Does a college student on LSD experience the same thing as a Buddhist monk in nirvana or a Catholic nun in ecstasy? Similarly, does yoga affect our brain in the same way that prayer does?
2. In evolutionary terms, what's mysticism for? If, as many researchers maintain, it persists in humanity as a survival mechanism, how does it help us survive?
3. Why are there so many (as Ken Wilber calls them) "enlightened jerks"? Why do so many gurus and mystics do such bad things: drink too much, abuse their followers, poison people (as Bagwan Shree Rajneesh and Shoko Asahara did), and spend obscenely?
4. Researchers have divided mystical experience, whether generated by drugs, meditation, sensory deprivation, or prayer, into three broad categories: heavenly, hellish, and visionary. Which of these is "true"? Or are all of them merely the byproducts of misfiring brain circuits?

5. If nirvana is so great, why did God bother creating anything else?
6. Scientists and historians have suggested that many religious visionaries—Saint Paul, Muhammad, Joan of Arc, Joseph Smith (the founder of Mormonism), and others—were epileptics. If so, were their profound spiritual experiences counterfeit?
7. Given the recent research indicating that psychedelic drugs can improve mental function, why should Albert Hofmann, who first synthesized LSD, have second thoughts about the drug?
8. What are the neurological links between enlightenment and madness?
9. How close is science to creating ecstasy on demand?
10. Even if high-tech, instant ecstasy "feels" the same as the old-fashioned, elusive, hard-won kind, can it be the same?

