

# Drawing the line: extraordinary groups and experiences mysticism and psychosis

[Psychology](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In the absence of concrete proofs for divine existence and when beliefs are largely dependent on faith, the thin line delineating mysticism and psychosis and the length to which people such as the Shakers, the Mormons and the Oneida is unclear. Indeed, the lengths one would go through for their shared communal values further makes it difficult to distinguish between from psychiatric patients experiencing delusions and hallucinations to mystical experiences.

For believers, mystical experiences represent the affirmation of their beliefs. Moreover, it is considered as a sanctimonious process thus, it is offending if not blatantly rude to be considered a psychotic or a schizophrenic when recounting these divine experiences. On the other hand, for non-believers particularly in the medical and mental health field: mystical illusions, delusions and hallucinations are abnormalities that can be explained by abnormal functioning of the brain caused by organic or psychological problem.

In this essay, I argue that extraordinary groups that have been established because of divine revelations as manifested by mystical experiences are less likely to succeed as in the case of the Shakers and the Oneidas. On the other hand, those whose organization centers not only on the leadership but on well-defined goals such as the Mormons are more likely to persist. Consequently, mystical experiences and its criteria are still blurry. I argue that similar to the mental health field, they are altered thought processes that can be due to vivid imagination and trauma which may be caused by organic or psychological factors.

Thus, this resulted to the inability of primitive or extraordinary groups to persist over time. Commitment Mechanisms and Mystical Experiences A famous philosopher once wrote that the measure of a community's strength lies in the amount of contradiction it can contain - such is the idiom that can be used in defining and defending extraordinary religious groups that have existed in earlier societies. It should be noted that communities in earlier times demanded more commitment.

Some have closed systems where they do not allow other people or the outsiders to take part in their community. An inherent characteristic of these groups is the charismatic leadership that advocates mystical experiences-experiences with the divine which made them alter their ways and in the process, profess and preach in order to bring about the word of the holy. From these origins, communities such as the Shakers and the Oneida and the Mormons built their church and communities further strengthened by sacrifices and mean to strengthen their commitment.

The prevalence of these groups in earlier times persisted for years because of their use of commitment mechanisms which is defined as " specific ways of ordering and defining the existence of a group" (Zellner and Kephart, 75). Inherent in this definition is the consideration of societal norms and traditions that defines their community or commune. This in turn is important in the interpretations of meanings and experiences within the religious or mystical context. First, the origins of these extraordinary groups emphasize mystical experiences that people at the time believed because of the lack of knowledge on scientific truths.

Inadvertently, the early beliefs of the products of these communities' shows that these mystical and religious beliefs may be true at some point in their time, it is only true in such because there was no medical or scientific explanation of the occurrences at the time. For instance, in the story of Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers, the death of her children during child birth and the use of forceps in her last child were harshly interpreted as children signifying trouble and God's displeasure (The Shakers, 200).

While she was seen as a leader at the time, we can also assume that her traumatic psychological experiences because of these failed births may have shaken her psychological balance as evidenced by her avoidance of her husband and their bed. Thus, Ann Lee's divine revelation of going to the New World and establish itself with a large following (201). Moreover, the extraordinary success of the Shakers in gearing up their economy but the withdrawal of their members and demanding they be paid shows that not all Believers succumbs to the principles that the Shakers stand for (223).

Second, the inability of these communities to stand through the test of time shows that mystical experiences are fairly difficult to establish because very few people experience this. Consequently, the criteria by which these experiences are not related to some psychological or neurological event were not proven at the time. Thus, this led to lack of resilience and the need of these groups to protect themselves from the outside world thereby creating a closed system.

A classic example of mystical communities that did not stand the test of time is that of the Oneida Community founded by John Jumphrey Noyes belived in the Complex or Group marriage, equal work for men and women, and the <https://assignbuster.com/drawing-the-line-extraordinary-groups-and-experiences-mysticism-and-psychosis/>

religious idea of Perfectionism here on earth which to this day is met with speculation and doubt. Particularly, the belief of having sex on any partner that they please subject to the approval of the leadership was met with sarcasm. Moreover, the pursuance of wealth and merriment is also one distinct feature of the Oneidans.

While the community thrived for 30 years, it failed as it could no longer sustain the brutal opinions and perspectives of the outside world to which it tried to seclude itself. However, while not all communities have perished, some have become less popular. One community that has successfully survived the "outside world" is that of Mormonism founded by Joseph Smith, Jr. who advocated the belief in God and most closely resembles the Christian faith among the primitive communities. While Mormons still exist today, the death of their leader led to the disintegration of the leadership.

Third, the manner by which communities seek the commitment of their members involves criteria that are against the realistic and ego-bound traditions of current society. In the article *Live in Love and Union* emphasizes the differences between successful from unsuccessful communities. The first virtue is that of sacrifice: communities that demands greater sacrifices from its members would exhibit stronger affinity and commitment, for instance, on religious practices, consecration is considered as a sacrifice in the same way that fasting and a vow of poverty is also considered as such (76).

In less successful communities, the level of sacrifices is low and thus, its members tend to disintegrate because they are less at stake to retain community membership. Consequently, another important strand of sacrifice is that of abstinence from pleasurable activities and material things such as <https://assignbuster.com/drawing-the-line-extraordinary-groups-and-experiences-mysticism-and-psychosis/>

alcohol, tobacco, coffee, rich foods and meat including that of sex and (77). A classic example of abstinence and celibacy is that of the Shakers, Oneidas, Amana, Zoar and Snowhill-considered as successful communities which prohibits certain material needs.

Leaving the worldly and materialness of the world is considered to be an important religious sacrifice for these communities. In line with this, austerity or the vow of poverty is also considered to be an important sacrifice mechanism among religious orders (79) as a means to show that the earthly body is less important than the divine life that is awaiting following the life on earth. As quoted by the article Live in Love and Union, " I was enabled to sacrifice them with all their prospects and pleasures, that I might live a pure and holy life, according to the will of God" (80).

Consequently, the inability of these communities to sustain their members shows that the concept of free will as opposed to divine and mystical experiences is still considered more heavily. For one, the lack of success of these groups to maintain the unawareness of the members from the current occurrence in the outside world shows that it is not divine or mystical intervention but rather a spur of the moment delusion, hallucination or illusion.

Another important factor considered is that of investment: successful communities were shown to have invested more on their religious traditions and beliefs than the less successful ones (Living in Love and Union, 80).

Similar to a business purchase, people who have committed their resources and their beliefs in a community through financial donations and participations are more likely to be integrated in the system in the lesser

<https://assignbuster.com/drawing-the-line-extraordinary-groups-and-experiences-mysticism-and-psychosis/>

extent that communities who do not demand will not regain this type of community. This is further reinforced by the irreversibility of the investments making the people less likely to defer.

Finally, in order to retain the strength of the group, they are forbidden to marry outside of the group and to commit with internal subunits (82). Thus, having a closed system protects the communities from changes that can disrupt the equilibrium of the community order and in the process, preserve the belief system of God and deity thus, enabling religious practices to persist. Conclusion: Mysticism and Psychosis It is commonly observed that many; if not most, seminal religious leaders have undergone some form of mystical experiences.

Despite the extensive and significant nature of this phenomenon, scholars have reached little consensus about the causes and character of such extraordinary moments. There is a thin line delineating mystical experiences from psychosis and while I agree that mystical experiences may have the possibility to occur, psychosis is still the better diagnosis for these types of occurrences. For one, as shown in the history of extraordinary groups, the inability of these groups to persist and the dependence on miracles shows the weak foundation of these experiences.

As we have shown in the essay, Ann Lee for instance and her mystical experiences were preceded by a traumatic experience of childbirth and death of her children. The unavailability of scientific diagnosis of the time made it easier to note the experience as mystical. For one, as Stifler, et al noted, mystical experiences in psychosis and mystical experiences for

contemplatives or thinkers do not vary with only differences noted due to their cultural experiences and interpretations (18).