

Mysticism in World Religions: A Cross Cultural Perspective

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Mysticism is a phenomenon that exists since time immemorial throughout the world. It is an unending quest to know the ultimate reality. Its beginning in reality is of unknown origin. Mysticism is not restricted to any particular sect or civilization rather it is beyond borders and is open ended for its richness. It is a communication of individual soul with the Absolute. It is a state where a mystic moves into the land of infinity and loses his/her personal existence to God thereby merging his/her finiteness with the infinite being. Therefore, the aim of all religions of the world is to have union with the Absolute reality though the means/paths may vary but the destination to eternity remains the same. The sole objective of mysticism is to have the unification of individual soul with the Universal Being. It is a state where all the distinctions or bonds are broken and every religion voices mysticism under different labels - it is fana in Islam, samadhi in Hinduism, nirvana in Buddhism, union of God in Christianity so on and so forth. In fact, mysticism is the root of all religions of world. The paper attempts to discuss the common mystic dimension among different religions of the world thereby paving way to understand universality of God from the broader perspective.

KEYWORDS: Mysticism, Religion, Absolute Truth.

INTRODUCTION

Mysticism owes its origin to the Greek mysteries which mean “to shut one’s lips or eyes” or something which is “Hidden” to an ordinary individual. The shutting of one’s eyes and lips meant to shut one’s soul to the external things in order to gain the spiritual solace within one’s inner self. As a term, mysticism is in a way associated with secret religious rituals. It makes one aware of something mysterious which only a person with mystical bent of mind can solve. According to Greeks mysticism has always remained attached with something secret, mysterious, or occult.

Mysticism is a multidimensional phenomenon and different scholars and philosophers have given different definitions depending upon their conceptual understanding of the term. Some of them are cited as under:

Spurgeon believes, “Mysticism is, in truth, a temper rather than a doctrine, an atmosphere rather than a system of philosophy” (4). Inge remarks: “Mysticism means communion with God, that is to say, with a Being conceived of as the supreme and Ultimate Reality” (8).

Underhill opines: “Mysticism is basically a passionate desire to become one with God. The mystic way for him is a process of sublimation which carries the correspondence of self with universe up to high levels than those on which our normal consciousness works” (3). A. J. Arberry writes:

It has become platitude to observe that mysticism is essentially one and the same, whatever may be the religion professed by the individual mystic: a constant unvarying phenomenon of universal yearning of human spirit for personal communion with God (qtd. in Zaehner ix).

Mysticism is thus essentially one and the same among all the mystics; it is a universal yearning of personal communion with God. The mystic grasps abiding unity of all things, co-immanence of eternal with temporal and apprehends truth that is beyond the grasp of an ordinary intellect.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MYSTICISM

William James (1901-1902), in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* remarks: “The mother sea and fountain-head of all religions lie in mystical experiences of the individual” (qtd. in Harmless 10). He gave following characteristics of mystical experience:

- (a) *Ineffability*. According to James, the mystical experience “defies expression, that no adequate report of its content can be given in words” - that mystical experience is, in a word, “ineffable” (qtd. in Harmless 13).
- (b) *Neotic quality*. Mystics stress that their experiences give them “insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect” (13).
- (c) *Transiency*. Means that a mystical experience does not last long and occurs for a very short span of time. According to James: “They fade into the light of common day” (13).
- (d) *Passivity*. It is a passive state of a mystic when his mystic experience is at its peak. He is not in an active state rather a passive recipient. “In the thrall of such mystical moments, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power”(13).

Underhill elaborates the mystical experiences and emphasizes some of the characteristics of Mysticism as:

- (a) *Active is practical and theoretical.* The mystical experience is personal and final. It is a state like a revelation, and is very intense in nature. This “experience, in the words of Plotinus, is the soul’s solitary adventure: the flight of the alone to Alone” (Underhill 80).
- (b) *Mysticism is an entirely Spiritual Activity.* It is a state where man is completely engrossed in the Absolute Being. He is completely possessed by God and is in need of nothing other than the realm of eternity. In other words, his aim is spiritual rather than worldly.
- (c) *The business and method of Mysticism is Love.* The main mystic object to be loved is God, and nothing else. In the words of Underhill, “Mystic love is a total dedication of the will; the deep-seated desire and tendency of soul towards source” (82).
- (d) *Mysticism entails a definite Psychological Experience.* Mysticism involves the remodeling of one’s character under intense hunger and rise to the high levels of spiritual consciousness.

CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

Christianity from the very beginning has been a deeply mystical religion and it is the most powerful religion which has dominated the western world. In Christianity the aim is to satisfy the will of God, like Jesus Christ did. He satisfied his will by his personal connection to attain union with God. Christian mysticism is the innate union of soul with the Absolute Truth. It involves the desire of human being to attain union with God through mystical experiences or by the act of deep contemplation. Michael Cox states about Christian mysticism as the:

Tendency as the name implies, the ascent towards union with Triune God which is undertaken principally through the person of Son: Christ is literally and figuratively the Door through which the divine nature of the Father can be apprehended (34).

Therefore, it can be resolved that Christianity is a deeply mystical religion and it expresses the ultimate unity of individual with the Divine. For a Christian mystic, it is a inner quest or burning desire to attain union with the Ultimate being. Therefore, it can be said that:

Much of the Christian mysticism revolves around the experiential realization, embedded in prayer, ritual, ascetic practices and contemplation, of what such a trinitarian and God was

like, of how beings could know God and of how they could be at their most intimate with him (Ursula 5).

ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

Sufism or Islamic mysticism is commonly known as *Tassawuf*. It owes its origin to Prophet Muhammed (PBUH). In Sufism, more emphasis is laid on esoteric aspect instead of the external ritualistic practices. It is the state wherein a mystic/sufi attains union with Almighty. “Sufism, being the marrow of the bone or the inner dimension of Islamic revelation, is the means *par excellence* whereby *tawhid* is achieved” (Nasr 31). Abu Bakr Shibli has said: “*Tasawwuf* is renunciation, i.e., guarding oneself against seeing ‘Other-than-God’ in both the worlds” (Shah 16). Martin Lings explains:

From time to time a Revelation ‘flows’ like a great tidal wave from the Ocean of Infinitude to the shores of our finite world; and Sufism is the vocation and the discipline and the science of plunging into the ebb of one of these waves and being drawn back with it to its Eternal and Infinite source (11).

There are different connotations regarding the word *Sufi*. Some say it means *safaa* while some call them as *Ahl-e suffa* called as bench sitters. Others say it came from *suff* meaning row or from wool *suf* referring to woolen garment.

Again a “Sufi is one whose speech accords with his behavior and whose silence indicates his state, and discards worldly connections (*as sufi iza nataqa biana nutuqihi min al haqayiqi wa an sakata nutqata anhul jawahrih biqatil alayiq*)” (Shah 16).

Therefore, Sufism is a state in which one’s aim is to come closer to one Divine Being and the Sufi is the one who is wholly involved in contemplation of Divine, breaking all worldly ties and remaining engrossed in meditation in pure seclusion. The Sufis draw their inspiration from their distinct self understanding and practices based on the Islamic teachings.

JEWISH MYSTICISM

The Jewish mysticism came into being when the schools of practical and speculative mysticism were at its peak. Jewish mysticism also known as *Kabbalah* was at its peak in medieval times.

Kabbalah (the generic term for mystical tradition in Judaism) asserted that the external world of visible reality was a pale reflection of an invisible higher realm. The Kabbalist

yearned for direct access to higher spiritual realm, to experience personally its hidden splendor (qtd. in Nielson *et al.*, 421).

The two major scriptures of the Jewish mysticism include “*Sepher Yetzirah*” also known as “The Book of Creation” and *Zohar* and “The Book of Light”, *Zohar* is the seminal text of *Kabbalah*. In Jewish mysticism:

God in his transcendence is described as *Einsof*, an infinite Absolute Reality which is beyond all human conceptualization and relation. “God was “the most hidden of the most hidden”; he was the creator of all forms of being nurtured his creation with radiant power and grace (421).

The aim of Jewish mysticism was to attain communion with God, moral perfection, and unity with Absolute. Further, “*Kabbalah* offered a way to individual salvation and the salvation of God’s world, all predicated on the assumption that proper human acts had cosmic implication” (421).

BUDDHIST MYSTICISM

Unlike other forms of mysticism, Buddhist mysticism is different. Buddhist mysticism aims at identifying one’s true self and living according to its principles. Moreover, it includes cleaning one’s soul through meditative practice and moral behavior. The founder of the Buddhist religion was Gautam Buddha and we have number of stories in canonical scriptures which describe his mystical experiences. Buddha seems to have attained unifying experience (*Nirvana*) at the time of enlightenment and death.

According to Geoffery Parrinder:

The Upanishadic Brahman, as an absolute Being in union with the soul, was apparently not considered by the Buddha, But early Buddhist texts do speak of ‘becoming Brahman’ in the sense of liberation into Nirvana. It is often said the goal is to be ‘without desire, cool, having joy, and oneself become Brahman’. The Buddha himself is said to have ‘become all sight, become all wisdom, become the truth (*dhamma*), become Brahman (56).

This state of becoming a ‘Brahman’ is a state of enlightenment. It is the union of soul with Divine Being. In Buddhist discipline, this state is described as *Nirvana*.

SHINTO MYSTICISM

The Shinto is the religion of Japan and it is the most prevalent faith in Japan. Shinto was a humane religion. According to Parrinder:

Shinto is the Chinese term, Shen-Tao, for the Japanese 'Way of the Gods', and it is the ancient Japanese religion which, like Chinese Taoism, became strongly influenced by Buddhism. The superior powers of ancient Shinto were very diverse: natural, ancestral, heroic, fertility, magical. But characteristic of them is the conviction that the gods (*Kami*) are related to men and actually born of the same parents. For example the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu O-mi-kami, is not only a deity of nature but the ancestress of the royal house, as other spirits are of other families. Thus it is said that the same divine blood flows through plants, animals, men and gods. The universe is not inanimate but instinct with life, in which man shares and which he reveres at especially sacred places (73).

TOAIST MYSTICISM

Confucius (born 551 BC) was called as Chinese Socrates who held the belief that happy home was the basis of civilization. About Confucius Parrinder states:

Confucius, like Socrates was a religious in broad sense of the term. He too, believed in a divine order that worked for good, in observing certain ritual, and in basing his ethical teaching on religious convictions. He spoke of Heaven (*t'ien*) in a sense of Nature or God and used common formulas which included the divine name. More profound, as with other Chinese thinkers, was his concern for the 'Way' (*Tao*) which is the principle by which things should be done or kingdoms ruled (66).

Tao-the Way, the "Way of Heaven" is the Way that brought harmony in all natural things. *Taoism* was clearly known as real religion of China as mysticism appeared clearly in it. The founder of *Taoism* was Lao Tzu who wrote *Tao Te Ching* (*The Treatise of Way and its Power*). It is a book that teaches men to hold fast for attaining the unity and it is the *Tao* Way that underlies and governs all existence. It is a way by which all chaos and barriers of earthly life are resolved. Another great work of *Taoism* is associated with Chaung Tzu, who taught freedom from restraints on individual minds and how can one rise above worldly desires. He is a mystic who taught that man must live in unity with *Tao* i.e., Absolute truth.

The Chinese *Taoism* is based on concept of *Yin* and *Yang* i.e., feminine and masculine, darkness and light, that itself arose from the concept of *Tao*.

HINDU MYSTICISM

The Hindu mysticism evolved with the sacrifice and grew with the early documents of Hindu religion known as Vedas, which are based on world affirmation and well being of the earth. After Vedas, we have Brahmins, which shaped the sacred texts. Later around 600 BC, we have Upanishads, in which teachings of seers are recorded. Upanishads means “secret” or “esoteric teaching”. These Upanishads enumerate both immanence as well as transcendence of God.

On the ground of monistic mysticism which is a state of Absolute truth. We have the two terms *Brahman* the universal principle which removes duality and *Atman* individual soul. “The whole universe is Brahman, and one should calmly worship Brahman. That as the being in which we live and move and dissolve...it contains all the world; it never speaks and has no care.... This Soul of mine in the heart is Brahman, and when I go from here I shall merge into it. Moreover, Mystical unity in the monistic sense is asserted in “great words” or utterances, such as “I am Brahman”, and especially “Thou art That” (Parrinder 34-35).

In Hindu mysticism, we have Sankara of the eighth century, he has been called as “mystic of the soul”. In his mysticism, a mystic bursts from the depth of one’s being which state that ‘I am the Brahman’, and is further elaborated by *Advaitic school* ‘thou art that’. “Sankara’s teaching is monistic and his mysticism is an impersonal identification of self and the divine, a realization of divinity of the soul” (Parrinder 38).

Mysticism is therefore the spiritual quest of an individual to search the reality. Every religion leads one towards the One Divine Being. In the present study, our aim is to study the mysticism of two schools of thought: one is of Rishism and the other is Perennial philosophy. The two are discussed as under:

RISHISM

Scholars have given different opinions regarding the origin of word Rishi. According to pre-Islamic context: “Rishi means saint or an ascetic in Sanskrit literature” (qtd. in Khan 36). In Kashmir:

Some medieval Muslim scholars of Kashmir, have, indeed tried to Islamize it and have

preferred to see its derivation in the Persian word *raish* or *rish*, which means: “the feathers of bird, plumage; a wide garment; abundance of means of life; the beard (Rafiqi 159).

However, the term Rishi was renewed according to Suharwardi tradition by Nuruddin, by doing away with Hindu asceticism and adopting all practices of the Islamic way. In this regard Baba Dawud Mishkati states:

before Nuruddin, the Rishis were actually Brahmins of Kashmir, But, Nuruddin according to Suharwardi mystic, renewed tradition by doing away with the ways of renunciation of Hindu ascetics (Khan 38).

So, it can be concluded that scholarly opinions are divided regarding the origins of the word Rishis. The Rishi order is, therefore, a local spiritual order which had developed as a result of various mystical practices and elements existing in Kashmir during that period. “It was not until the emergence of Nuruddin as founder of indigenous order of Muslim mystics (*Rishi Silsilah*) that the social significance of the Rishi tradition came to be established for the first time in Kashmir history”(Khan 37).

It becomes evident that Shaikh-ul Aalam was a teacher of all Rishis and practiced highly ascetic practices and was a truly gifted person who showed an extreme devotion to God and abstained from temporary pleasures of the world.

PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY

The very term *philosophia perennis* first appeared in Renaissance. The term was first used by *Augustinus Steuchus* also called as (Agostino Steuco) in his work titled as *De Philosophia Perennni Libri X (1540)*. “Steutchus coined the term to signify “the Christian pinnacle of wisdom to which all other philosophical currents in one way or another point” (qtd. in Oldmeadow 70). But the term was later detached from scholastic theology by Gottfried von Leibniz, a Latin Librarian and rendered it to a philosophy which is common among all religions of the world. The term was no longer confined to Christianity; rather it signified the common expression of both Eastern and Western religions of the world.

The perennial philosophy was popularized by Aldous Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy* (1944), which was a thematic compilation of religious and mystical passages from all over the world. He states about the term as:

The metaphysic that recognizes, a divine reality substantial to the world of things and lives

and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul similar to, or even identical with, Divine Reality, the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of immanent and transcendent ground of all being (qtd. in Oldmeadow 71).

Although Huxley popularized the term *Perennial philosophy*, however, its main exponents were Ananda Coomarasamy, Rene Guenon, and, Frithjof Schuon. Among them the leading scholar of Perennial philosophy calls the term as: "totality of primordial and universal truths" (qtd. in Oldmeadow 312).

Schoun defines the term in his book titled as *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* as:

Inward and permanent Revelation "which coincides with our Kernel of immortality", "a kind of Inward Religion" which becomes obscured or forgotten, thereby necessitating the various and Revelations of different traditions (88).

Thus, perennial philosophy asserts that there is one Divine source of wisdom which lies in all world religions. It includes Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Although their paths are different, yet their search for the Absolute Truth leads them to a common end. Therefore:

The central idea of the term is that outwardly religions are different but from the esoteric point of view they are same. The Hindu tradition, for example includes many Gods, Judaism insists there is one God, and Buddhism declares question of God to moot. Or again, Christianity believes that God is a Trinity and the Divine Son was incarnate as Jesus Christ, beliefs explicitly rejected by Islam (Cutsinger 1)

This paper gives a general outline of mysticism along with its characteristics. It also gives a comprehensive account of the various mystical traditions among the different religions of the world. Further the paper also discusses the Rishism and perennial philosophy under the backdrop of mysticism.

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