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Mysticism in World Religion

Sidney Spencer

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SIDNEY SPENCER





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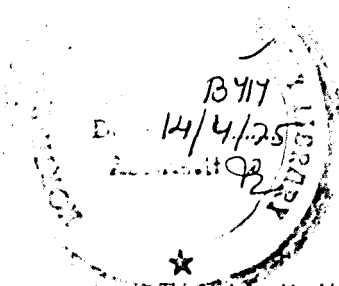
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IN GRATITUDE FOR HER
INVALUABLE HELP
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Preface

A GREAT deal has been written in recent years about mysticism, but (apart from a short work published in the U.S.A. entitled *An Introduction to Comparative Mysticism* by J. de Marquette) no attempt has hitherto been made in English to present an account of the various types of mystical religion in a single volume. It is to fill that gap that the present work has been written. As a student of mysticism for many years, I have been impressed by the need of a careful and comprehensive survey of the whole field. Generalizations about mysticism are often misleading because they rest on an insufficient factual basis. Before we can fruitfully generalize, we must know something of the different forms which mysticism has assumed through the ages. I have endeavoured in this volume to deal with these different forms. In doing that, I have taken into account the chief work which has been done by specialists. As far as possible in a book of this size, moreover, I have allowed the mystics to speak for themselves by including numerous quotations from their writings.

It is my conviction that mysticism is of the utmost importance to religion and so to the future of mankind. At a time when religion is met, as never before on a similar scale, with the challenge of materialist philosophy, and when the growth of scientific knowledge of the forces of Nature and the power which this brings with it are a constant temptation to men to neglect the things of the spirit, it is all the more necessary that the inner life should be quickened and renewed. But if the life of religion is to be renewed, there must be a renewal of vision and of understanding; and nothing can be of so much value from this standpoint as the study of the experience and teaching of the mystics.

My indebtedness to students of mystical religion is evident on every page. I have given at the end a list of the chief works which I have consulted, and to which I would refer readers for further study. I would like to express the very great gratitude which I feel to the Spalding Trustees in Oxford for the generous help which they have given me. I am also indebted to the Librarians of Dr Williams's Library, of Manchester College, Oxford, and of the Buddhist and Theosophical Libraries for their kind assistance.

SIDNEY SPENCER



CHAPTER 1

Mysticism in Primitive Religion

WHAT is characteristic of the mystics is the claim which they make to an immediate contact with the Transcendent. Such contact typically assumes the form of knowledge, often described in terms of vision, and of union. Experience of this kind belongs in its developed expression to the higher forms of religion, but in the lower culture also traces of it may be found. An illustration of the occurrence of supernormal states of consciousness among primitive peoples is the experience known to the Eskimo as the 'angakoq' or illumination. This illumination is said to come to the novice in the course of his training for the office of 'shaman' (or prophet). After long hours of waiting, during which the spirits are invoked, he suddenly feels within him a luminous fire, which gives him powers of perception unknown to others. His range of vision is said to be extended beyond the house where he is, and beyond the mountains. He perceives future events, and sees souls in distant regions and in the land of the dead.¹ A more specifically mystical experience is related in the autobiography of an American Indian, 'Crashing Thunder', a member of the Winnebago tribe. On one occasion, 'Crashing Thunder' tells, he became aware, as he prayed to Earthmaker (a North American deity), sitting among his fellow-tribesmen, of the presence of Earthmaker and of his own soul in its unity with him and with the souls of his fellows.

I prayed to Earthmaker. And as I prayed, I was aware of something above me, and there he was. That which is called the soul . . . that is what one calls Earthmaker. This is what I felt and saw. All of us sitting together, we had all together one spirit or soul. I did not speak to them and get an answer to know what had been their thoughts.²

In primitive religion a place of outstanding importance is held by men who act as intermediaries between their fellows and

1. Eliade, *Le Chamanisme*, pp. 69f.

2. Radin, *Primitive Religion*, p. 278.

CHAPTER 2

Hindu Mysticism

It is fitting to begin our study of mysticism in the historical religions by considering the mystical aspects of the religion of India. For in Indian religion mystical experience holds a central place.

More than other religions [Sir Charles Eliot has said in the Introduction to his great work, *Hinduism and Buddhism*] Hinduism appeals to the soul's immediate knowledge and experience of God . . . The possibility and truth of this experience is hardly questioned in India, and the task of religion is to bring it about.

In our own time significant testimony was borne to the mystical emphasis characteristic of Indian religion by C. F. Andrews, whose religious outlook was revolutionized by his contact with it.

When I went deep into the heart of India [he said] I found the whole emphasis to be laid on the realization of God within the soul.¹

That 'realization' is the keynote of Hindu piety.

I. THE UPANISHADS

So far as it is known to us historically, Indian mysticism had its beginnings in the experience of the seers whose teaching is recorded in the Upanishads. The word 'Upanishad' means 'secret' or 'esoteric teaching'. The books so named have been described as 'practical manuals of mystic teaching'. They had their origin in the instruction given by certain teachers to groups of disciples. They represent a remarkable combination of fantastic speculation of a mystical character and profound intuitive insight. Indian religion in the earliest form known to us with any certainty was a polytheistic Nature-worship with an elaborate ritual of prayer and sacrifice.² The hymns of the Rig Veda (com-

1. *What I Owe to Christ*, p. 155.

2. Little is definitely known of the religion of the Indus Valley civilization.

CHAPTER 3

Buddhist Mysticism

I. THE HINAYANA AND THE MAHAYANA

BUDDHISM arose in India as a heretical movement which rejected the authority of the Vedas. In course of time it came to assume widely differing forms. The main line of division is between what are commonly known as Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism. The Mahayana grew up in India some centuries after the death of Gotama the Buddha (Shakyamuni) in 483 B.C. It spread to China before the beginning of the Christian era, and at a later time to Japan, Tibet, and Mongolia. 'Mahayana' ('great vehicle' or 'great path') is the name adopted by its adherents in contradistinction to 'Hinayana' ('small vehicle' or 'inferior path'), by which they characterize the religion of other Buddhists. The Hinayana is known by its followers as the 'Theravada' or 'Doctrine of the Elders'.¹ It is the type of Buddhism predominant in India in early centuries, though later supplanted by the Mahayana. Buddhism virtually disappeared from the land of its birth by the tenth century, partly owing to the Muslim conquests. The Hinayana has prevailed traditionally in Burma, Ceylon, Thailand, and Cambodia. Its teaching is represented by the Pali version of the Scriptures, which claims to be the teaching of the founder, as well as by the writings of the exponents of the various Hinayana schools. The Canon of Scripture was not finally fixed until the reign of Ashoka, more than 200 years after the death of Gotama, and it is clear that it embodies the teaching of the predominant party in the Buddhist Order, which cannot be equated with the outlook of the founder himself. Attempts have been made, notably by Mrs Rhys Davids, to reconstruct the actual teaching of the founder, but these are necessarily speculative, and no such endeavour is made here.

There is no hard-and-fast distinction between the Hinayana

1. The Theravada is, strictly, one school of the Hinayana, but the term is also used to cover the whole.

CHAPTER 4

Taoist and Confucianist Mysticism

I. TAOISM

(a) *Early Taoism*

ACCORDING to the traditional view, the founder of the mystical philosophy known as 'Taoism' was Lao Tse (Master Lao), an older contemporary of Confucius, said to have been born in 604 B.C. and to have written the mystical treatise, the *Tao Te Ching* (*Treatise of the Way and its Power*). Recent scholars agree that the *Tao Te Ching* (known alternatively as the *Lao Tse Book*) originated at a later time – in the fourth or third century B.C. The movement of thought which it represents must, however, go back beyond the fourth century. During the lifetime of Confucius (in the sixth century) there were hermits, who retired from the world, and lived a simple contemplative life; and it was among these men that Taoism grew up. There was a certain basis for the practice of contemplation in the traditions of ancient China. The central feature of Chinese religion was the sacrifice offered to the ancestral spirits. In the sacrifice a prominent part was played by the shih or medium, in whom, it was believed, the spirit of the ancestor to whom the sacrifice was made came temporarily to dwell. In course of time the belief arose that the spirit might be induced to remain permanently in a man. The heart must be cleansed so as to make it a fit home for the spirit; outer activities and emotions must be stilled. Thus there grew up the practice known as tso-wang, 'sitting with blank mind' (or 'in forgetfulness'), comparable to the Indian yoga or dhyana. In China, as in India, breath-control was adopted as a means of inducing this condition. In the fourth and third centuries there were many who taught and practised inner stillness, and who claimed by this means to attain knowledge of the Transcendent.¹

The first Taoist teacher of whom we have any real knowledge

1. See Waley's Introduction to *The Way and Its Power*.

CHAPTER 5

Greek and Hellenistic Mysticism

I. GREEK MYSTICISM

(a) *The 'Mysteries' and Orphic Religion*

THE religion of the Greeks as we see it in Homer is a highly anthropomorphic polytheism. The gods are clearly defined personalities, marked off rigidly from their worshippers, demanding prayer and sacrifice of men, and in return granting them help and favour. But alongside of this popular religion, which was the affair pre-eminently of the State, there was in classical times a religion of another type, represented by the 'Mysteries', or cults celebrated in private by groups of devotees. It was these Mystery-cults which gave rise to aspiration and experience of a distinctively mystical character. Among them there are two which are of outstanding importance - the Eleusinian and the Dionysian Mysteries.

The Eleusinian Mysteries find their centre in the enactment of the myth of Demeter, the Earth-goddess, and her daughter, Kore, the Corn-maiden, who was identified with Persephone - in her origin a pre-Hellenic mistress of the realm of the dead. The Mysteries appear to have been derived from an early agrarian festival, concerned with the promotion of fertility; but they assumed, with the introduction of Persephone, a deeper and more inward meaning. The myth tells how Persephone, while gathering flowers in the meadows, was seized by Hades, the lord of the dead, and carried off to his kingdom, and how Demeter in her sorrow wandered throughout the world in quest of her, till at last she was brought back by Hermes at the behest of Zeus. Since she has tasted the food of Hades, Persephone must spend a third of the year with him, but year by year she comes back from the underworld in the spring. The ceremonies with which the festival was celebrated were open to all Greeks, and later to men and women of all nationalities seeking initiation. They were preceded

CHAPTER 6

Hebrew and Jewish Mysticism

I. MYSTICISM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

THE most widely differing views have been held as regards the relation of the religion of the Old Testament to the attitude and experience of the mystics. It is sometimes said that the Old Testament knows nothing of this attitude and experience; it stands for a type of religion altogether foreign to mysticism. On the other hand, it has been maintained that mysticism 'prevailed in varying degrees of intensity throughout the centuries comprised in the Old Testament history'.¹ It is certainly true that mysticism does not hold the central place in Hebrew religion, as it does in the higher phases of Hinduism or of Mahayana Buddhism. It has been said, indeed, that Hebrew religion stands for a doctrine of God which lays exclusive stress on the divine transcendence and so allows no scope for the growth of mysticism. In his classic work, *Prayer*, Heiler has drawn a sharp contrast between the religion of the prophets, which represents the highest phase of Hebrew piety, and the religion of the mystics. He identifies mysticism with a monism which excludes all duality, and prophetic religion with a dualism which denies union. For prophetic religion, he declares, 'God and man are never mingled' (p. 169). In forming this conclusion, Heiler ignores a fundamental aspect of prophetic experience. In his account of mysticism he says a good deal about ecstasy. To be in ecstasy, he observes, is to be 'obsessed and engulfed by the superhuman and the divine' (p. 8). In the ecstatic experience 'the barriers between man and God disappear' (p. 169). But ecstasy is not an experience which can be confined to those whom Heiler describes as mystics. Among the early Hebrews, certainly, it belonged to the prophetic tradition. The prophetic movement in Israel was influenced by the religion of Canaan, one feature of which was the work of prophets, conceived as intermediaries possessed by

1. Abelson, *Jewish Mysticism*, p. 7.

CHAPTER 7

Christian Mysticism

I. MYSTICISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

(a) *The Mysticism of Jesus*

WE have seen that the outstanding feature of the experience of the Hebrew prophets was the sense of immediate contact with God. Now, it is clear from the gospels that the prophetic tradition was renewed in Jesus – hence his conflict with the legalism of the Scribes and Pharisees – and it is natural to infer that he shared the distinctive prophetic experience. The inference is confirmed by the records. The story of his life begins in Mark with his baptism in the Jordan, when ‘he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him [or ‘into him’, as an ancient MS. has it] like a dove’ and he heard a voice from heaven proclaiming his divine sonship (Mark 1: 10 f.). In the Western text of Luke 3: 22 the words are said to have been: ‘Thou art my Son; this day I have begotten thee.’ It was widely held in the early Church that, as this version was held to imply, it was through the descent of the Spirit, possessing him and penetrating his being, that the divine life was born in Jesus. The event was sometimes described as ‘Christ’s second nativity’. Whatever its precise significance, the main fact, from our present point of view, is that the story, with its visionary and auditory features, is closely similar to the records of the call of Isaiah and Ezekiel. And just as, with the prophets of old, it is manifest that underlying the sense-imagery in which their experience was clothed there was the immediate apprehension of the divine Presence, breaking in upon them and consecrating them to their appointed task, so it was with Jesus. It is no rash conjecture to suppose that beneath the details of the gospel story there lay a profound and overwhelming experience of God, binding Jesus to Him in a continuing unity.

The story of the Baptism, whatever its historical basis,

CHAPTER 8

Islamic Mysticism

I. THE GROWTH OF SUFISM

THE growth of Islamic mysticism (or Sufism) is a significant illustration of the strength of the mystical tendency in religion. On the face of it, the religion of Mohammed can scarcely be regarded as of itself providing fruitful soil for the growth of that tendency. Yet within a comparatively short time after the Prophet's death a movement arose among his followers which has given birth to some of the greatest of the mystics. There is no doubt that Christian and Neo-Platonic influences played an important part in the development of Sufism. But the starting-point lay in the nature of Islamic piety. The Sufis have traditionally looked upon Mohammed himself as the greatest of all mystics. That is not a view which critical study sustains. There is no question in his own life and teaching of any such experience as union with God. The gulf that divides man from God in his outlook is too great to admit of any such possibility. At the same time, there are elements in his attitude and teaching which contain the germ of a mystical development. Mohammed believed himself to be the recipient of a divine revelation. God (he taught) is 'nearer to man than his neck-vein'; He is 'the light of the heavens and the earth'; wherever we turn, there is His Face, which abides, resplendent with majesty and glory, when all on earth shall pass away. Mohammed laid the greatest stress on the need of personal surrender and submission to God and on the practice of prayer. It is necessary, according to his teaching, not only to offer prescribed acts of prayer at stated times, but to remember God continually.

It was these elements in the religion of the Prophet which formed the basis for the development of a mystical piety. In its initial stages Sufism was primarily an other-worldly and quietist, rather than a definitely mystical, movement. It represented a reaction against the worldliness and luxury and the external

CHAPTER 9

Mystical Religion: A Survey of Tendencies

THE study of mysticism in the various religions of the world reveals very wide differences in its forms of expression, but at the same time it reveals a certain essential unity of experience and outlook. In this final chapter an endeavour will be made to indicate some fundamental tendencies which the varied types of mysticism have in common, and at the same time to indicate some outstanding differences.

I. THE MYSTICS AND THE NATURE OF REALITY

It is recognized everywhere that through mystical experience men are brought into immediate contact with ultimate Reality, and this contact is commonly described in terms both of vision or knowledge and of union. The knowledge which direct experience brings transcends thought or intellectual knowledge, and the Reality which it apprehends is felt to be of such a nature that any attempt to express it in the categories of thought is of necessity inadequate. The typical theology of the mystics is summed up in the phrase used of the teaching of Plotinus, 'the negative theology of positive transcendence'. But if all forms of thought based on finite being are insufficient to express the nature of That which transcends such being, it is generally admitted that some terms are more, and some less, insufficient. Ultimate Reality is the supreme and infinite Perfection and Glory. The mystics differ notably among themselves regarding the use of personal language concerning the Ultimate. The terms which they use are often impersonal – Brahman, the Void, Nirvana, the Good, the One; but the implication of their experience is that the Ultimate is not impersonal in the sense that it is on a lower level of being than man himself; it is not of the nature of a mere unconscious force. It is on an immeasurably higher level – not below but above personality as we know it, devoid of the limitations of personality, yet not devoid of its essential qualities of life, consciousness,

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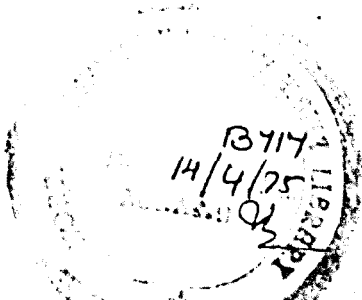
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