



OUTLINES OF COMPARATIVE VIEW OF HINDU AND CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

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Motto: «Every word, every image used for God is a distortion more than a description». (Anthony de Mello)

ABSTRACT

Mysticism is about knowing and unifying man with God (unio mystica), in a process that involves concerted cognitive and ascetic efforts. Mysticism does not follow, according to the classic pattern, the moralizing of man, but reach at the direct and immediate knowledge of God. Thus, mysticism is not, firstly, a matter of ethics, but a theoretical or, rather, an epistemological one. For what is being pursued and done in the states of ecstasy is a different kind of knowledge than the one allowed to people in the common state, knowledge which is also a special state of grace. Thus, in order to achieve the mystical state, Hinduism emphasizes true knowledge. The union with Brahman is given, but it must also be realized consciously through the salvific gnosis. The process of union in Hinduism is accomplished by removing the veil of ignorance (māya), that is, by knowing that the world is illusory, by the act of consciousness that man is essentially, always, identical to God. The knowledge (jñāna), obtained through meditative contemplation, is the path of mysticism in Hinduism. Once unity with God is given, it must only be consciously accomplished by removing the illusion that man would not be one with God-Brahman. The state of union is at the disposal of the ascetic, who has withdrawn from the world and lives only for contemplation. The model of Hindu ontological identity, Christianity opposes the model of personal transfiguration, through the continuous elongation of the person in God, realization possible only from the perspective of divine uncreated energies. God is not present with His being in the space that He created, but by plasticizing the reasons of creation, He constitutes the latter as an organic whole, harmonious in himself, which He sustains through His will. Unlike the ontological identity between God and the creature of Hindu perspective, the Christian mysticism of the Eastern Church postulates the eternally ontological difference between man and God.

Keywords: mysticism; Hinduism; Christianity; unification; being; knowledge; person; transfiguration; divine energies; identity;

INTRODUCTION

Bertrand Russell, a philosopher who cannot be suspected of sentimentality or of a bias in favor of mysticism, wrote in a famous essay as follows: “The greatest men who have been philosophers have felt the need both of science and of mysticism.” He adds that the union of the mystic and the man of science constitutes “the highest eminence that it is possible to achieve in the world of thought.” Further, “this emotion [mysticism] is the inspirer of whatever is best in man.”¹ Unarguably, coming forth from such an illustrious

¹ Bertrand RUSSELL, *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays*, London, Longmans, Green & Co., Inc., 1921, pp. 4, 12. As examples of this union of mysticism and science in the greatest philosophers, Russell mentions



philosopher and scientist, this is a remarkably high estimate of the value of mysticism. Nonetheless, no definition could be both meaningful and sufficiently comprehensive to include all experiences that, at some point or other, have been described as “mystical.” In 1899 Dean W. R. Inge listed twenty-five definitions. Since then the study of world religions has considerably expanded, and new, allegedly mystical cults have sprung up everywhere. The etymological lineage of the term provides little assistance in formulating an unambiguous definition. The word “mystic” has its origin in the Greek mysteries. A mystic was one who had been initiated into these mysteries, through which he had gained an esoteric knowledge of divine things and been ‘reborn into eternity’. His object was to break through the world of history and time into that of eternity and timelessness. The method was through initiation ceremonies of the sort so vividly described by the Latin writer, Apuleius, in ‘The Golden Ass’. Through the mysteries the initiated entered into something *holy* and *numinous*, a secret wisdom about which it was unlawful for him to speak. The word ‘mystery’ (*mysterion*) comes from the Greek verb *myein*, to shut or close the lips or eyes. This term signifies in general that which is unknowable or valuable knowledge that is kept secret. In the language of the early Christians the mysteries were those religious teachings that were carefully guarded from the knowledge of the profane.²

However, in due course of time the concept of *mysticism* came to have an extended, a different meaning. In that syncretism of Greek and Oriental philosophy which occurred in the centuries immediately preceding the birth of Christ, known as Neo-Platonism, it came to mean a particular sort of approach to the whole problem of reality, in which the intellectual and more especially the intuitive faculties came into play. As a result of the fusion of Christian and Neoplatonist ideas in the early centuries of the Christian era, a system of so-called mystical theology came into existence, which was one of the main foundations of Christian mysticism.³

Mysticism, according to its etymology, implies a *relation to mystery*. In philosophy, *Mysticism* is either a religious tendency and desire of the human soul towards an intimate union with the Divinity, or a system growing out of such a tendency and desire. As a philosophical system, *Mysticism* considers as the end of philosophy the direct union of the human soul with the Divinity through contemplation and love, and attempts to determine the processes and the means of realizing this end. This contemplation, according to *Mysticism*, is not based on a merely analogical knowledge of the Infinite, but as a direct and immediate intuition of the Infinite. According to its tendency, it may be either speculative or practical, as it limits itself to mere knowledge or traces duties for action and life; contemplative or affective, according as it emphasizes the part of intelligence or the part of the will.⁴

Mysticism has its fount in what is the raw material of all religion and is also the inspiration of much of philosophy, poetry, art, and music, a consciousness of a *beyond*, of something which, though it is interwoven with it, is not of the external world of material

Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato, and Spinoza, but this list is obviously intended to be only illustrative and not exhaustive

² In pagan antiquity the word *mystery* was used to designate certain esoteric doctrines, such as Pythagoreanism, or certain ceremonies that were performed in private or whose meaning was known only to the initiated, e.g., the Eleusinian rites, Phallic worship. Ernest R. HULL, “Mystery”, in Charles G. HERBERMANN (edit.), *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume 10: *Mass Music-Newman*, 1907-1913, p. 1313.
URL: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/herbermann/cathen10.html>

³ F.C. HAPPOLD, *Mysticism. A Study and an Anthology*, Penguin Group, 1990, p. 18.

⁴ G.H. JOYCE, “Mysticism”, in Charles G. HERBERMANN (edit.), *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume 10: *Mass Music-Newman*, p. 1317.



phenomena, of an *unseen* over and above the seen. In the developed mystic this consciousness is present in an intense and highly specialized form.

The mystical element enters into the commoner forms of religious experience when religious feeling surpasses its rational content, that is, when the bidden, non-rational, unconscious elements predominate and determine the emotional life and the intellectual attitude. In the true mystic there is an extension of normal consciousness, a release of latent powers and a widening of vision, so that aspects of truth unfathomed by the rational intellect are revealed to him. Both in feeling and thought he apprehends an immanence of the temporal in the eternal and the eternal in the temporal. In the religious mystic there is a direct experience of the Presence of God. Though he may not be able to describe it in words, though he may not be able logically to demonstrate its validity, to the mystic his experience is fully and absolutely valid and is surrounded with complete certainty.⁵

Not only have mystics been found in all ages, in all parts of the world and in all religious systems, but also mysticism has manifested itself in similar or identical forms wherever the mystical consciousness has been present. Because of this it has sometimes been called the *Perennial Philosophy*.

Due to its wide range of meanings, the commentators disagree about the characteristics of the mystical experience. Those mentioned in William James's classical *The Varieties of Religious Experience* rank among the most commonly accepted. *Ineffability* emphasizes the private, or at least incommunicable, quality of the experience. Mystics have, of course, written quite openly and often abundantly about their experience. But, by their testimony, words can never capture their full meaning. Secondly, James mentions the *noetic* quality of the experience. To be sure, mystical insight hardly ever augments theoretical knowledge. Nevertheless its insight suffuses a person's knowledge with a unique, all-encompassing sense of integration that definitely belongs to the noetic order. This point deserves emphasis against those who assert that mysticism is the same everywhere and that only the post-mystical interpretation accounts for the difference.⁶ The *passivity* of the mystical experience may well be its most distinctive characteristic. Its gratuitous, undeserved nature stands out, however much the privileged subject may have applied himself to ascetic exercises or meditative techniques. *Transiency*, a more controversial characteristic, has been challenged, for great mystics have remained for prolonged periods in enhanced states of consciousness. Intermittent intensive experiences figured therein as moments of a more comprehensive surpassing awareness. Perhaps we should speak of the *rhythmic*, rather than the transient, quality of mystical life.⁷ To James's four characteristics another one may be added: *integration*. Expanded beyond its ordinary limits, the mystical consciousness somehow succeeds in overcoming previously existing opposition in its integration with a higher reality. This, however, should not be interpreted to mean that all restrictions cease to exist.⁸

⁵ He has been "there", he has "seen", he "knows". With St. Paul, in the poem by Frederic W.H. Myers, he can say: "Whoso has felt the spirit of the Highest / Cannot confound nor doubt Him nor deny. / Yea with one voice, O world, though thou deniest, / Stand thou on that side, for on this am I." F.C. Happold, *Mysticism. A Study and an Anthology*, p. 19.

⁶ Distinctions begin with the noetic qualities of the experiences themselves.

⁷ Louis DUPRÉ, "Mysticism" [First Edition], in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Second Edition, Lindsay JONES, Editor in Chief, vol. 9: *Mary • Ndembu Religion*, Macmillan Reference USA, Thomson Gale, 2005, pp. 6341-6342.

⁸ Some of them clearly maintain a sense of transcendence within the union. This is precisely what gives them their distinctly religious character. V. *Ibid*, p. 6342.



1. AN ANALYSIS OF HINDU MYSTICISM

Mysticism is about knowing and unifying man with God (*unio mystica*) in a process that involves concerted cognitive and ascetic efforts. Mysticism does not follow, according to the classic pattern, the moralizing of man, but reach at the direct and immediate knowledge of God. Thus, mysticism is not, firstly, a matter of ethics, but a theoretical or, rather, an epistemological one. For what is being pursued and done in the states of ecstasy is a different kind of knowledge than the one allowed to people in the common state, knowledge which is also a special state of grace.⁹

The examination of the great mystical currents begins (in many specialized treatises) with the Hindu movement. This seems to have preceded other approaches to this phenomenon, if not into metaphysical speculation, at least in its precise examination. The vast majority of metaphysical problems had already been identified by the wise men of ancient India, who had found subtle solutions, but these seemed to by advocate of an incomplete thinking system, of course, outside the space of divine positive Revelation.¹⁰

Differently from the nature mysticism of the West or Far East, in Hindu mysticism there is a strong element of *world-denial* and yet there is *world-affirmation* also. There is both monism and theism, at many different periods. World-denial appears in Indian thought and practice, alongside world-affirmation, and it developed gradually. After the oldest sacred books of Vedas came the Brahmanas, ritual texts for the Brahmin priests, and the Aranyakas, “forest treatises”, for those who went apart from the world. These were followed by the more systematic Upaniṣads, “sessions” which overlap the previous texts so that the first of them is called the *Great Forest Upaniṣad*.¹¹

No equivalent of the term ‘mysticism’ exists in Sanskrit and its use with regard to what we find in the *Upaniṣads* may be misleading: The dominant philosophical tradition in the West insists that the term is non-cognitive so that it has no place in any epistemological investigation, cognition being defined as knowing by sense perception and reasoning. But as far as the Upaniṣads are concerned, the fact that mystical viewing of reality is not a process of intellection does not mean that what we know in such viewing is only a state of feeling and not of knowledge. Mystical viewing amounts to what we call direct experience, in English usually termed ‘intuition’. It is accepted that it may illumine life in some way, but what it delivers does not qualify for the name ‘knowledge’.¹² But the teachers claim that what they know in such experience is knowledge (*vidyā*,) indeed such knowledge is higher (*para*) compared to the knowledge derived from sense perception and reasoning which is called lower (*apara*).

⁹ Ioan Gh. SAVIN, *Mistica și Ascetica Ortodoxă (Mysticism and Orthodox Ascetics)*, Forward by dr. Antonie Plămădeală, Sibiu, 1996, p. 23.

¹⁰ Jacques De MARQUETTE, *Mistica. Hinduism – Budism – Grecia – Israel – Creștinism – Islam (Mysticism. Hinduism - Buddhism - Greece - Israel - Christianity – Islam)*, transl. Dan Dumbrăveanu and Victoria Comnea, Herald, București, 1996, p. 29.

¹¹ From early settlements of the Aryan invaders on the plains of the Indus River and its tributaries, the subjugation and also mingling of older peoples, there developed over a thousand years more orderly societies, spreading down the Ganges plains. With the growth of towns and cities there was leisure for speculative thought, the formation of schools of doctrine and meditation, and some reaction against city life towards the peace of the forest..

¹² But the teachers claim that what they know in such experience is knowledge (*vidyā*,) indeed such knowledge is higher (*para*) compared to the knowledge derived from sense perception and reasoning which is called lower (*apara*). Cf. Pratima BOWES, “Mysticism in the Upanishads and in Śankara’s Vedānta”, in *The Yogi and the Mystic. Studies in Indian and comparative Mysticism*, Karel WERNER, ed., Durham Indological Series No.1, Curzon Press Ltd., 1994, p. 53.



The Upaniṣads, like other philosophies and science, look for unifying principles in the universe. They try to explain the world in elemental terms, emphasizing especially power, breath and, surprisingly, food. One well-known Upaniṣad affirms that the cosmic Being, Brahman, “is food”. For food, as living matter, is the basis of life upon which breath depends, as well as mind, understanding and bliss. Hence matter and spirit are bound together in a mysticism of union with the whole of existence, which is a participation in, rather than a withdrawal from the world. So the Upaniṣadic mystic cries out in ecstasy, in one of the rare personal statements:

“I am food! I am food! I am food!
I am an eater of food . . .
I am a maker of verses. . .
I am first of the world-order,
I am earlier than the gods.
I, who am food, eat the eater of food!
I have overcome the whole world!”¹³

The Upaniṣads seek for a single principle as the changeless ground of the universe. Sometimes this is the soul or self (*atman*), both particular and universal. When the sage Yājñavalkya was leaving his wife to go forth to the forest-dwelling stage of life he offered her a settlement. She asked whether this would make her immortal and if not what could achieve that. He replied that only “love of the soul” could make anything dear, enumerating husband, wife, sons and all possessions. It is the Soul that should be seen, heard, thought about and considered, for by understanding the Soul all the universe is known.¹⁴

Another term used in the Upaniṣads is Brahman, which at first meant power and developed into sacred power, universal spirit, world-ground, the All, cosmic Being.

“The formless Brahman is the breath and the space within the self. There is nothing higher than this, for it is ‘the Real of the real’. Living creatures are real and this is their reality.”¹⁵

These two terms, Atman and Brahman, are used in subtle ways, both distinctly and identically. The ancient gods themselves were thinned down from their thousands into one, and that was Brahman. The only duality that remained was between universal and individual souls and these almost inevitably became identified, so that Brahman and Atman are often interchangeable terms.

“The whole universe is Brahman, and one should calmly worship That as the being in which we live and move and dissolve. It contains the entire 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.”¹⁶

Mystical unity in the monistic sense is asserted in “great words” or utterances, such as «I am Brahman», and especially «Thou art That» (the famous Sanskrit utterance: *tat tvam asi – तत्त्वमसि*) This phrase occurred in a series of parables where a philosopher, Uddalaka, instructed his son in the true nature of being. Rejecting the formal priestly education that the boy had received, the father expounded that teaching “whereby what has not been heard or

¹³ *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 3, 10.6, in R.C. ZAEHNER, ed., *Hindu Scriptures*, 1938, rpt. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1978; rpt. Everyman’s Library, David Campbell Publishers LTD, 1992.

¹⁴ *The Brhadāranyaka Upanishad – With the Commentary of Śankarācārya*, 2.4., transl. by Swami Madhavamanda, Advesta Ashrama, Calcutta, 1997.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 2.3.

¹⁶ *Chāndogya Upanishad*, 3.14, in R.C. ZAEHNER, ed., *Hindu Scriptures*.



thought or understood becomes heard, thought and understood”. In nine examples he affirmed that all creatures have Being as their origin, support and dwelling.¹⁷

“That subtle essence is the Soul of the whole universe. That is reality. That is the Soul. You are That.”¹⁸

Bees collect the juices from different trees and reduce them to unity so that they cannot distinguish whether they are the juice of this tree or that. So when creatures merge into Being, they do not know what individuals they were formerly. Similarly, when rivers flow into the sea they do not know their former individuality, but they become that Being.¹⁹

In the Upaniṣads, the unifying and the spiritualizing tendencies eventually merged in the idea of an inner soul (*ātman*), the Absolute at the heart of all reality to which only the mind has access. This is not a metaphysical theory, but a mystical path to liberation. It requires ascetical training and mental discipline to overcome the desires, oppositions, and limitations of individual selfhood.

“As a man, when in the embrace of a beloved wife, knows nothing within or without, so this person, when in the embrace of the intelligent Soul, knows nothing within or without.”²⁰

Clearly, if *ātman* is identified with *Brahman*, then the logical conclusion is that the Self is in all things, and all things in the Self. The capital ‘S’ here is meant to indicate that the ‘Self’ that is assimilated to Brahman is not the everyday phenomenal self (i.e. the mind/body), but rather that aspect of the human being that is qualitatively similar to the transcendent principle of Brahman – that is, the undifferentiated conscious awareness, the inner sense of pure being which humans are capable of experiencing in the primary Hindu mystical practice: meditative absorption, or *samādhi*.

Here lies the origin of the *advaita* (nondualist monism that would become dominant in classical Hinduism). But even if any distinction beyond the One were to be a mere *illusion*, as in the extreme interpretation of *māyā* (originally, the created world itself) given by most famous Hindu thinker, Śaṅkara (8th century AD), it still remains an opposition to indiscriminate Unity. Metaphysical speculation in classical Hinduism may occasionally have surpassed its mystical tendency. But that there *was* a religious experience at the basis of this extreme monism cannot be doubted.

“The starting-point of Śaṅkara and the Sāṅkhya-Yoga is the *experience* of the immortality of the soul; and immortality in this case does not mean the infinite prolongation of human life in time: that is *Samsāra* which the Hindus regard rather as a living death; it is death-in-life, not life-in-death. It means rather an unconditioned and absolutely static condition which knows nothing of time and space and upon which death has no hold; and because it is not only pure Being, but also pure consciousness and pure bliss, it must be analogous to life.”²¹

It would be difficult to decide whether Śaṅkara’s uncompromising monism was an outcome of his experience for which he found confirmation in his predecessors’ interpretations of the Upaniṣads or whether his previous acceptance of monism on philosophical grounds found subsequent support in the overwhelming experience of oneness

¹⁷ Geoffrey PARRINDER, *Mysticism in the World's Religions*, Oneworld Publications, Oxford, 1995, p. 35.

¹⁸ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 6.8-16.

¹⁹ Geoffrey PARRINDER, *Mysticism in the World's Religions*, p. 35.

²⁰ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4,3.22.

²¹ R.C. ZAEHNER, *Hinduism*, Oxford University Press, London, 1966, p. 74.



in *samādhi*. The Upaniṣads, of course, contain materials which enabled other schools also to claim their support for their own different interpretations. It has, however, been an undisputed tenet within Śaṅkara's school for centuries that 'this world of diversity is false; reality, myself included, is non-dual *brahman*; the evidence of it is *vedānta* [= Upaniṣads], gurus as well as direct experience'.²²

As some scholar point out, we have here an almost inextricable symbiosis of doctrine and experience, but what is important is that Śaṅkara most emphatically insisted on the actual realization of personal experience without which the doctrine means nothing. One has to know the truth directly; all else, including verbal knowledge of the doctrine, is still within the sphere of ignorance. Again: to know *brahman* is to be *brahman*. The practical way to this realization is the way of knowledge which became known as Jñāna-Yoga.²³

Of course, not all the Upaniṣads were radically monist in their expression, nor was the Vedāntic theology the only mysticism of the self in India. A related but philosophically distinct school of Indian thought also has its roots in the Upaniṣads. In Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad we read:

"Two birds, companions and friends, nestle on the very same tree. One of them eats a tasty fig; the other, not eating, looks on."²⁴

Here we see a very early expression of the dualist school that sees man as a dual entity of mind-stuff (*prakṛti*) and pure spirit (*puruṣa*). The tree is the body; the first bird, the enjoyer of sense pleasures, i.e. the phenomenal self; the second bird, the eternal witness, the pure conscious knower of all cognition and experience.²⁵ Thus, the system of Sāṅkhya-Yoga advocates a radical dualism. It recognizes two irreducible principles of reality: *prakṛti*, the material principle and source of energy, cause of both the material world and psychic experience, and *puruṣa*, discrete units of pure consciousness similar to the *ātman* of the Upaniṣads. Yet *puruṣa* must be liberated from confusion with *prakṛti* by means of concentrated effort. Sāṅkhya thought, although it has no place for deity and is specifically atheistic, was assimilated into the age-old tradition of yoga, providing the practice with a soteriological and cosmological framework. This mystical self-isolation recognizes no absolute One beyond the individual spirit. Liberation here means the opposite of merging with a transcendent Self. If the idea of God appears at all, it is as that of one *puruṣa* next to all others, their model insofar as God is entirely free of cosmic contamination.²⁶

The inevitable differences in descriptions of the ultimate and its real nature, well known already from the Upaniṣads themselves, led quite naturally to the establishment of different schools of Vedāntism of which there are at least five. The most important one after Śaṅkara's is *Viśiṣṭādvaita* (literally "Advaita with uniqueness; qualifications") of Rāmānuja (11th century AD). In it the popular path of *Bhakti* (love for God) received an elaborate

²² Cf. A.J. ALSTON, "Śaṅkara on the Absolute", in *A Śaṅkara Source-book*, vol. 1, Shanti Sadan, London 1981, pp. 62, 112.

²³ Śaṅkara's Yoga path follows in many details the older schemes of Yoga training as known particularly from Patāñjali's account, but it also has its own specific techniques of developing the discriminatory faculty of the mind whereby it could sift through its experiences and eliminate from them those which are concerned with transitory, unreal features as compared with those which point to the eternal and real. Karel WERNER, "Mysticism and Indian Spirituality", in *The Yogi and the Mystic*, K. Werner, ed., pp. 28-29.

²⁴ *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, 3.1.1, in R.C. ZAEHNER, ed., *Hindu Scriptures*; Patrick OLIVELLE, *Upaniṣads*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 274.

²⁵ Paul MULLER-ORTEGA, *Classical Yoga Traditions of India*, classroom lectures, Spring, 1999, p. 135.

²⁶ In its pure form, Sāṅkhya-Yoga, far from leaning toward pantheist monism (as Vedantic spirituality does), results in the most extreme individualism. Louis DUPRÉ, "Mysticism" [First Edition], p. 6343.



doctrinal backing in which a certain relative or qualified status is allowed for individual beings also in the context of ultimate reality which is conceived in personalized terms. Thus Vedāntism, like Buddhism, reflects the ineffability of the ultimate experience which does not lend itself to simple descriptions.²⁷

A mystical theology is less concerned about logical consistency and sharply defined concepts than about adequate translations of the actual experience. This is particularly the case in a tradition wherein the mystical element constitutes most of the core of the religion itself. Hence in describing such later Hindu thinkers, like the so influential *Rāmāṇuja* as “qualified dualists”, we should be aware that we are referring more to a practical devotional than a speculative-metaphysical attitude. *Rāmāṇuja* may never have abandoned the metaphysical assumptions of the monist tradition in which he grew up. But finding absolute monism inadequate for the practice of spiritual life, he reaffirmed the traditional concept of a God endowed with personal attributes (*saguṇa brahman*), instead of the attributeless absolute substance (*nirguṇa brahman*). God thereby is not merely a model but also a redeemer who assists the soul on its path to liberation.²⁸

In thus qualifying the monist doctrine, *Rāmāṇuja* was inspired by what the *Bhāgavadgīta* (c. 2nd century BCE) had assumed throughout. This mystical poem, perhaps the finest spiritual work to come from the East, is hard to classify by Western canons. The narrative assumes a clearly theistic position: the god Viṣṇu incarnated in Kṛṣṇa exhorts the hero Arjuna on the eve of battle with his stepbrother to take heart and fight. But the message he delivers ranges from traditional piety and observance of the ancient rites to the monism of the Vedānta, combined with the dualistic cosmology of Sāṃkhya-Yoga. The work is a synthesis in all respects. Not only does it unite the monist and theistic strands, but it also presents a method of combining the active with the contemplative life. It advises a mental discipline that enables a person to act with total detachment from the fruits of his deed. By itself, the active life (*karman*) weaves its own web of causes and effects, entailing an endless cycle of birth and death – the very essence of what a person seeks to be liberated from.²⁹

Yet various kinds of yoga detach the mind from this natural determination, while still allowing a person to fulfill the obligations of his station in life. Through equanimity of emotions, holy indifference, and purity of heart, even the active person will come to detect the one presence of *brahman* in all things. The ‘Gospel of Hindu spirituality’ (L. Renou), *Gīta* is not a manual of yogic practice. It is a mystical work that culminates in a vision of God. A most powerful theophany completes Krishna’s description of God’s presence in the world (chap. 11). Still the poem concludes with the sobering advice to seek God in the ordinary way of piety rather than through self-concentration. The advice was taken up by the *bhakti* movement, which produced some of the finest flowers of Hindu spirituality and which continues to nourish much of Indian piety today.³⁰

There have been objections to this kind of interpretation of differing mystical doctrines and the consequent claim of a common core in all mystical traditions. S.T. Katz expressed it bluntly saying that mysticism promises “something for everybody if not

²⁷ Karel WERNER, “Mysticism and Indian Spirituality”, in *The Yogi and the Mystic*, p. 29.

²⁸ Surendranath DASGUPTA, *Hindu Mysticism*, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., New York, 1927, p. 59.

²⁹ *Understanding Mysticism*, edited by Richard WOODS, Garden City, New York, 1980, p. 158.

³⁰ Cf. Louis DUPRÉ, “Mysticism” [First Edition], p. 6344. See also: Donald H. BISHOP, ed., *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience: East and West*, London and Toronto, 1995. A useful collection of essays surveying mysticism in various traditions; F. Samuel BRAINARD, *Reality and Mystical Experience*, University Park, Pa., 2000.



everything to everybody”.³¹ But that is an ill-founded criticism. The differing interpretations merely express the infinite richness of the ultimate which must be bigger than individual minds which can therefore approach it from a large variety of starting points. Various simplified descriptions of the ultimate goal become wrong only if taken literally and if they are individually believed in to the exclusion of other descriptions. That can happen only when the doctrine, accepted on authority, becomes more important than the experience, which means that the mystic path is not really being followed. Then we are in the province of theological or philosophical polemics. These do occur also, of course, among historians of religions if they bring into their inquiry personal preferences or beliefs.³²

With Mahāyāna Buddhism and Vedāntism Indian spirituality reached its peak, particularly in the elaboration of mystical doctrines. But the whole process of mystical endeavors did not stop there. Although Buddhism eventually disappeared from the Indian scene to flourish elsewhere, Yoga and broader mystical movements as well as doctrinal creativity have continued to live in India till modern times.³³

2. THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN VISION ON MYSTICISM

The term *mysticism* remains colored if not hampered by the complexity of its own history: by its original Greek etymology (meaning “silence, secrecy, initiation, Ineffability”), by the early Christian use of the word *mystical* to describe the deeper significance of Scripture and liturgy, by the later Christian definition of *mystical theology* as loving union with God by grace, and by popular uses of mysticism as a label for anything nebulous, esoteric, occult, or supernatural. Although mysticism is now firmly entrenched within the vocabulary of the modern study of religions, its usage overlaps and to some extent competes with its employment in specifically theological contexts. Christian or at least theistic mysticism continues to be given prominence even in studies treating the subject at a more generic or theoretical level (e.g., in much philosophy of religion). Given its persistently Christian associations and the fact that the term has no real counterpart in other traditions, it is not surprising that the suitability of mysticism as a neutral, global term has been questioned by some scholars. Others, more radically, have challenged the authenticity of the concept itself, viewing it as a product of post-Enlightenment universalism.³⁴

Unlike some other religions, Christianity has never equated its ideal of holiness with the attainment of mystical states. Nor did it encourage seeking such states for their own sake. Nevertheless, a mystical impulse undeniably propelled it in its origin and determined much of its later development. The synoptic Gospels present Jesus as dwelling in the continuous, intimate presence of God. His public life begins with a prayer and a vision: “While Jesus after his baptism was at prayer, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily shape like a dove” (*Lk* 3:21–22). It ends with a prayer of total abandonment: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (*Lk* 23:46). Jesus initiates all important public acts with a prayer. He often withdraws from the crowd for long periods of solitary prayer. He interprets his entire existence through its reference to God, whom he calls Father. To himself

³¹ See the editor’s *Introduction to Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, Steven T. KATZ, ed., New York - Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 1.

³² Karel WERNER, “Mysticism and Indian Spirituality”, p. 29.

³³ As shown by the lives and work of such personalities as Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi, Aurobindo, Anandamayi Ma, Osho, Swami Sri Yukteswar, and others.

³⁴ Peter MOORE (2005), “Mysticism [Further considerations]”, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd Edition, Lindsay JONES, Ed., vol. 9, p. 6355.



he applies Isaiah's messianic words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." The same Spirit he promises to those who pray in His name.³⁵

Several themes give an overview of the New Testament soteriology: The Kingdom of Heaven and its Messenger, Christ the Messiah-Logos, the Light; the Paracletus or the Holy Spirit, who consecrate the mission of the Logos and make present His Person in history; Christ ascended into heaven will have to return as the Supreme Judge. The Kingdom, inaugurated here on earth: the Church is waiting for the final eschatology, of the Parousia of the Son, Who will come on the clouds to judge, then restore the perfect creation in the hands of the Father, intended to contemplate, in eternity, the Divine Image.³⁶

The mystical quality of Jesus' life is most clearly stated in the Fourth Gospel. Some of the words attributed to him may have originated in theological reflection rather than in his own expression. But they thereby witness all the more powerfully to the mystical impulse he was able to transmit to his followers. Biblical speculations on the Word of God are reinterpreted as expressions of God's personal revelation in an incarnated divine Logos. The intimate union between the Father and the Word is, through the Holy Spirit, granted to all true believers. Indeed, the presence of the Spirit entitles them to the same love with which God loves his Son. In John's gospel the two principal currents of Christian mysticism have their source: the theology of the divine image that calls the Christian to conformity, and the theology that presents the intimacy with God as a relation of universal love.³⁷

The tenor of early Christian mysticism was determined by the New Testament and by trends in Hellenistic Judaism (especially Philo Judaeus's scriptural theology and the late Judaic meaning of *gnōsis*). A third factor, usually referred to as Neoplatonism, must be added. Yet that movement, though influential in the development of Christian spirituality, may be too restricted an account of its beginnings; Origen (and, to some extent, even Clement) had already developed a mystical theology of the image before Plotinus. It might be more accurate, then, to look to the entire philosophically Platonic, religiously syncretic, and generally Gnostic culture of Alexandria at the end of the second century.³⁸ But soon Plotinus's philosophy was to provide much of the ideological apparatus for a Christian theology of the image. Though Plotinus's thought leaves no doubts about its Platonic origins, it was profoundly affected by such religious influences as the mystery religions, Gnosticism, Philo's Judaism, and that syncretism of Hellenistic currents and older Egyptian traditions that is usually referred to as Hermetism.³⁹

³⁵ For discussions of Christian mysticism, the reader may consult the introductions to many volumes of the "Classics of Western Spirituality" and the three-volume *A History of Christian Spirituality* (New York, 1963–1969) by Louis BOUYER, Jean LECLERCQ, Francois VANDENBROUCKE, and Louis COGNET.

³⁶ Serge MISSATKINE, *Mistica Noului Testament* (The Mysticism of the New Testament), in Marie-Madeleine DAVY, ed., *Enciclopedia doctinelor mistice* (*Encyclopedia of mystical doctrines*), vol. I: *Șamanism, Greci, Evrei, Gnoză, Creștinism primitiv* (*Shamanism, Greeks, Hebrews, Gnosis, Early Christianity*), Amacord, Timișoara, 1997, p. 227.

³⁷ For details: Robert S. ELLWOOD, *Mysticism and Religion*, 2nd ed., New York and Oxford, U.K., 1999. One of the few introductory surveys of major issues and positions in the study of mysticism, stressing the inseparability of mysticism from the rest of religion.

³⁸ In that climate Ammonius Saccas himself, Origen's and Plotinus's common master, grew up and taught.

³⁹ Plotinus's philosophy as exposed in his nine treatises (the *Enneads*) is often presented as an emanational process that originates in an undetermined Absolute (the One), becomes intelligible in a realm of mind (the *nous*), and arrives at its final hypostasis in a world soul (the *psyche*) shared by all individual souls. Such a presentation misses Plotinus's central insight and the source of its mystical fertility, namely, the immanence of the One in all the lower hypostases. The mystical-intellectual process for him consists in a return to that ever-present One, beyond the vision of the intelligible forms. Cf. Louis DUPRÉ, "Mysticism" [First Edition], p. 6346.



In some ways – as many scholars suggest – Christian thought is closer to Indian than to Semitic monotheism. For instance, the Hindu *avatār* belief shows to the Christian doctrine of the *Incarnation*, though each has its own distinctive features. The personal God of devotional Hinduism is comparable with the personal Christ who formed the faith from the Resurrection onwards and has remained central to Christian mysticism down the ages. Yet while Christian mysticism has taught and sought ardently union with God it has nearly always avoided, due to its Trinitarian doctrine, that claim to identity of divine and human which was ever-present in Hinduism. The Gospels teach the immanent presence of God, but personalized in Christ. “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17. 21) or “in your midst” and by his healings Christ shows “the kingdom of God come upon you” (Luke 11.20).⁴⁰

The experience of Christ, as described in the New Testament, was a dual experience. It was, first of all, the experience of the earthly Jesus, a man whom his disciples had known as man, who had died and, they believed, had risen again. It was also the experience of the divine indwelling of the Spirit of the risen Christ. These two experiences could not be separated. The man who died on a cross on a desolate hill was also the immanent Christ of whom St Paul spoke when he said, “I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.” (Gal 2.20).

An inner experience of the immanence of God in man had been known in India and reflection on it had resulted in those two fundamental statements which are the glory of the Hindu faith. This inner experience was, however, unrelated to history. In consequence Hinduism failed to find and express – though, in the *Gīta*, it moves towards it – a completely satisfactory synthesis between history and not-history, between time and timelessness, between matter and spirit. It fell to Christianity to try to find and express a richer synthesis.⁴¹

The conception of the relationship of God and the phenomenal world, of spirit and matter, were reorientated and reordered. The map of thought was redrawn and extended. Though the early Christian theologians persisted in declaring that they were only stating 'the faith once given to the saints', they were, though the issue was presented to them in a highly specialized form, unknowingly groping after a solution of the perennial metaphysical problem of how that which we call God was related to the world, of how spirit and matter were connected. Anything which was said could not but be, implicitly, if not explicitly, a fundamental statement on the whole problem of the nature of God, the material universe and man.

In Hinduism there was richness of inner experience and profound meditation on the problem, but in the end the material world was seen only as the 'play' of God and the chief end of man was to escape from the melancholy wheel of birth and death. No Hindu thinker could have written that magnificent passage in St Paul's Epistle to the Romans about the whole creation waiting for deliverance from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the sons of God.⁴²

What the Christian Church asserted was the complete *coinherence* – there is no better word – of matter and spirit, of the One and the All and the All and the One. Only by such an assertion could the experience of the earthly Jesus and the experience of the indwelling

⁴⁰ Christ is present “where two or three are gathered together in my name” (Matt. 18.20) and at the end affirms ‘I am with you always’ (Matt. 28.20). Geoffrey PARRINDER, *Mysticism in the World's Religions*, p. 142.

⁴¹ F.C. HAPPOLD, *Mysticism. A Study and an Anthology*, p. 111.

⁴² In Judaism, essential as were its insights as a prelude for the deeper insights which came out of it, there was a blind spot which resulted in the rejection by the Jews of the revelation when it came. The Greek philosophical mind proved itself incapable of reconciling the One and the Many. *Ibid*, p. 114.



Christ be intellectually fused, only thus could the full immanence of God in the world, as it had been seen in the Jesus of history, be adequately explained. In early Christian thought Christ did not stand alone. He was the second Adam, the first-born of many brothers, the Archetypal Man, man as he is in his essential being. In Christ, said St Athanasius, God was made man (*hominized*), that man might be made God (*deified*).

The mystical identification – one can use no other word – of Christ with the whole of mankind and with the whole of man's nature, flesh as well as spirit, is emphasized time and time again by early Christian thinkers.

“We hold that to the whole of human nature the whole essence of the Godhead was united. . . . He in his fullness took upon himself me in my fullness, and united whole to whole that he might in his grace bestow salvation on the whole man”.⁴³

It has been common to discuss Eastern Orthodox theology and mysticism separately from Western Catholic, but the Orthodox Church regards itself as catholic and universal, and the formal division of East and West did not come till the eleventh century when it was as much attacks from the Western Crusades as doctrinal differences that caused the split. Eastern Christians owed much to the Western Augustine or Gregory the Great, as Westerns were indebted to Eastern teachers like Athanasius and Basil.

In Greek mystical theology, however, the term “divinization” (*theosis*) is often used. Clearly this is not “deification” (*apotheosis*) in the sense of the Roman custom of regarding emperors as gods, which Christians unanimously rejected. St John of Damascus spoke of the interaction of nature and grace in restoring the perfection of man and uniting him progressively with the fullness of God, a “divinization” which was the way to union with God. Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389) spoke of God breathing in ‘the divine part’ of the soul so that it might receive the energy of God. St Maximus the Confessor (580-662) showed how grace united human nature to become “divine by grace”, in contrast to Christ, who was divine by nature. Yet Christ is an example to us, and theological arguments against the division of the two natures in Christ were intended also to deny the division of man and God and affirm the ultimate union of human nature with divinity. The constant statement, “*What is not assumed, cannot be deified*”, had in mind both the deification of the human nature of Christ and the divinization of the whole human person. Human divinization, however, though a process begun here, cannot be consummated until the world to come, when God shall be all in all.⁴⁴

On the other side, in the *East*, the Christian experience of God was characterized by *light* rather than darkness. The Greeks evolved a different form of mysticism, which is also found world-wide. This did not depend on imagery and vision but rested on the apophatic or silent experience described by Denys the Areopagite. They naturally eschewed all rationalistic conceptions of God. As Gregory of Nyssa had explained in his Commentary on the Song of Songs, “every concept grasped by the mind becomes an obstacle in the quest to those who search.” The aim of the contemplative was to go beyond ideas and also beyond all images whatsoever, since these could only be a distraction. Then he would acquire

⁴³ John B. O’CONNOR, *The Sacred writings of St John of Damascus*, Jazbee Verlag Jürgen Beck, Altenmünster, Germany, p. 137.

⁴⁴ Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, London: James Clarke & Co., 1957, pp. 126, 154, 196.



“A certain sense of presence' that was indefinable and certainly transcended all human experiences of a relationship with another person.”⁴⁵

This attitude was called *hesychia*, “tranquility” or ‘interior silence’. Since words, ideas and images can only tie us down in the mundane world, in the here and now, the mind must be deliberately stilled by the techniques of concentration, so that it could cultivate a waiting silence. Only then could it hope to apprehend a Reality that transcended anything that it could conceive.

How was it possible to know an incomprehensible God? The Greeks loved that kind of paradox and the *hesychasts* turned to the old distinction between God's essence (*ousia*) and his 'energies' (*energeiai*) or activities in the world, which enabled us to experience something of the divine. Since we could never know God as he is in himself, it was the 'energies' not the 'essence' that we experienced in prayer. They could be described as the 'rays' of divinity, which illuminated the world and were an outpouring of the divine, but as distinct from God himself as sunbeams were distinct from the sun. They manifested a God who was utterly silent and unknowable. As St Basil the Great had said:

“It is by his energies that we know our God; we do not assent that we come near to the essence itself, for his energies descend to us but his essence remains unapproachable.”⁴⁶

In the Old Testament, this divine energy had been called God's “glory”. In the New Testament, it had shone forth in the person of Christ on Mount Tabor, when his humanity had been transfigured by the divine rays. Now they penetrated the whole created universe and deified those who had been saved. As the word “*energeiai*” (*ενεργειαι*) implied, this was an active and dynamic conception of God. Where the West would see God making himself known by means of his eternal attributes – his goodness, justice, love and omnipotence –, the Greeks saw God making himself accessible in a ceaseless activity in which he was somehow present.

When we experienced the “energies” in prayer, therefore, we were in some sense communing with God directly, even though the unknowable reality itself remained in obscurity. The leading *hesychast* *Evagrius Ponticus* (d. 599) insisted that the 'knowledge' that we had of God in prayer had nothing whatever to do with concepts or images but was an immediate experience of the divine which transcended these. It was important, therefore, for *hesychasts* to strip their souls naked:

“When you are praying,” he told his monks, “do not shape within yourself any image of the deity and do not let your mind be shaped by the impress of any form.” Instead, they should “approach the Immaterial in an immaterial manner”.⁴⁷

Evagrius was proposing a sort of Christian Yoga. This was not a process of reflection; indeed, “prayer means the shedding of thought”.⁴⁸ It was rather an intuitive apprehension of God. It will result in a sense of the unity of all things, a freedom from distraction and multiplicity, and the loss of ego - an experience that is clearly akin to that produced by

⁴⁵ GREGORY of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. (*Writings from the Greco-Roman World, Band 13*), 6, transl. with an Introduction and Notes by Richard A. NORRIS Jr., Society of Biblical Literature, 2012.

⁴⁶ St BASIL the Great, *Epistle 234.1*, apud Karen ARMSTRONG, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Paperback, The Random House Publishing Group, New York, 1993, p. 223.

⁴⁷ EVAGRIUS Ponticus, *On Prayer*, 67, in *Filocalia sfintelor nevoințe ale desăvârșirii (Philokalia of the holy struggles of perfection)*, vol. 1, transl., Introduction and notes by Rev. Dumitru Staniloae, Harisma, Bucharest, 1992, p. 82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 71, p. 83.



contemplatives in non-theistic religions like Buddhism. By systematically weaning their minds away from their 'passions' – such as pride, greed, sadness or anger which tied them to the ego – hesychasts would transcend themselves and become deified like Jesus on Mount Tabor, transfigured by the divine energies.

The goal of Orthodox Christian mysticism is the union of man with God in Christ. But since God is endless, the goal of uniting with Him, of our perfection, never corresponds to an end from which we can no longer advance. All Eastern Fathers agree that perfection has no end, but is a furtherance “from glory to glory” (II Cor. 3.18), or the *epektasis* St. Gregory of Nazianzus are talking about. To characterize this union the term used in the East is that of deification or participation in divinity (“partakers of the divine nature,” II Peter 1.4). This destiny of man, who lives godly, but not by himself, but by participation – a distinction that prevents us from understanding the union in pantheistic terms – is expressed by the axiom of St. Athanasius the Great: “God has become man, so that man becomes God”. The destiny of man in Christianity is to achieve the status of Christ by way of *likeness*, that is, an adoptive son of God, or to become God, not by identification but through *participation* into divine nature. This union always maintains in Orthodox theology a theandric character.⁴⁹

The climax of spiritual life is the state of the believer, elevated above the level of his powers, not by himself, but through the work of the Holy Spirit. “Our mind comes out of itself and thus gets united with God, in which manner has become above mind,” says St. Gregory Palamas.⁵⁰ During the vision of God, the mind overcomes itself and all its mental works receive a work of God. For through God this power of mind passes from potency into the act.

The union with God or the mystical path is seen differently in Eastern and Western theology. Both, of course, talk about the three phases of spiritual life, called differently, according to the Church writer from whom it was borrowed. Thus, Dionysius the Areopagite speaks of three great phases: *purification* (καθαρσις), *illumination* (φωτισμος) and *perfection* (τελειωσις) or *union*. In the West, Thomas Aquinas, one of Dionysius's numerous commentators, calls them *via purgativa*, *via iluminativa*, and *via unitiva*, appointments that all scholastic adopted. According to both St. Maximus the Confessor and Nikita Stithatos' nomenclature, the hierarchy of the development of spiritual life is divided into: *απαθεια* (impassion, insensibility), *θεωρια* (view, contemplation), and *θεολογια*, which refers to *τελειωσις* (perfection) or to *θεωσις* (deification). Both Greek terminology, highlighted by St. Maximus the Confessor, and scholastic terminology, invariably refer to the same three Dionysian functions and determine the same three phases of spiritual life.⁵¹ The first two phases of *cleansing* or *depassioning*, which require a prolonged exercise constitute the Christian Ascetics, while the third one – the Mystic Theology, that is, *par excellence*, the science of man deification.

The distinction between the two great theologies appears when one takes into discussion the way of attaining deification or union of man with God. The meaning of union is perverted where there is a tendency towards the identification between man and God, that

⁴⁹ Dr. Alexandru-Corneliu ARION, *Panteismul hinduist și învățătura creștină despre Dumnezeu (Hindu pantheism and the Christian teaching on God)*, Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010, pp. 437-438.

⁵⁰ Sf. GRIGORIE Palama, apud Pr. prof. dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama (The Life and Teaching of St. Gregory Palamas)*, 2nd ed., Scripta, București, 1993, p. 52.

⁵¹ Nichifor CRAINIC, *Sfințenia – Împlinirea Umanului (Holiness - Human Fulfillment)*, *Curs de Teologie Mistică (Mystical Theology Lecture)*, hierodeacon Teodosie Paraschiv, ed., Trinitas, Iași, 1993, pp. 81-83.



is to say, to an update in the consciousness of an identity that would exist substantially in advance, as it is the case with Hindu pantheism. That is why some Protestant theologians – who understand by the mysterious union with God this identification exclusively – reject, *de principio*, any mysterious union, falling into the opposite extreme, i.e. of the irreducible separation between man and God⁵², and that's also because the Reformation has repudiated the Holy Sacraments. Moreover, in *Protestant theology* – from Albrecht Ritschl onwards –, it is believed that mysticism is possible only in a pantheistic view of God. It involves the dissolution of the human person into the divine substance of the cosmos. Consequently, mysticism is defined as:

“that form of the relationship with God in which world and human self are radically negated, and human personality gets dissolved, sinks into the infinite One of God.” That is why a conclusion so foreign to the genuine Christian personalism has been reached: “A person-to-person relationship in which both persons remain cannot be thought of as of mystic nature.”⁵³

In fact, from the traditional protestant point of view, there is uncertainty concerning such a thing as Christian mystical theology. There are many – and not only Protestants – who argue that the question cannot be raised; yet the phenomenon seems persistent, however impossible. The stimulus of a book called *The Protestant Mystics* was the categorical assertion that ‘there are no Protestant mystics’.⁵⁴

Unlike the West, in which, through *deism*, the direct connection with God got lost, by denying the teaching of St. Gregory Palamas about uncreated energies, the Orthodox theology consistently maintained that the Holy Spirit is present not only in the Church – from the day of Pentecost –, but also within the creation, from the beginning of the world, because all things were created *by* the Father, *in* the Son, *through* the Holy Spirit. The light that appeared in the universe before the stars and the sun, as the ideal original matter, which constitutes all the potentials of the created existence, is the created energy sprung out from the uncreated energy of the Spirit, Who walks over the waters at the moment of creation. Based on the work of the Holy Spirit, both in the Church and in the universe, Orthodox theology speaks of the transfiguration of cosmos and man *in* Christ, seen simultaneously as Creator Logos and Redeemer Logos. Thus, one of the absolutely peculiar dimensions of Eastern spirituality is the belief that matter can be transfigured, that it can be sanctified and even deified. Thus, Christ's redemptive work is interpreted in this *ontological* meaning.⁵⁵

For Orthodox theology, the energies or divine works are uncreated; they belong to the nature of God, but through them the Persons are to be revealed. It is so that by divine and deifying grace, as divine energy, man can reach at perfect communion with the Creator, while preserving however his personal identity. In «unio mystica», God is the one who takes the initiative, descending on the “thread” of the uncreated energies in the man meeting, in

⁵² Dumitru STĂNILĂOAE, *Ascetica și Mistica Ortodoxă (Ascetics and Orthodox Mysticism)*, vol. 1: *Ascetics*, Deisis, Alba Iulia, 1993, p. 16.

⁵³ P. Feine, *Der Apostel Paulus. Das Ringen um das geschichtliche Verständnis des Paulus*, Bertelsmann, Gütersloh, 1927, apud Mitropolitul Nicolae MLADIN, *Asceza și mistica paulină (Pauline asceticism and mysticism)*, Ed. and Preface by Pr. prof. dr. Ioan Ică, Deisis, Sibiu, 1996, p. 57.

⁵⁴ Anne FREMANTLE and W. H. AUDEN, *The Protestant Mystics*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1964, p. vii.

⁵⁵ Alexandru-Corneliu ARION, *Hindu pantheism and the Christian teaching on God*, p. 446. Through Incarnation, Sacrifice, Resurrection, and Ascension to Heaven, Christ has transfigured His own Body in order to make it – through the Holy Spirit – a means of irradiation and transfiguration of man and creation into the Church.



order to lifting him up to communion with Him, on the path of infinite spiritual progress in Christ and in the Church, through the Holy Spirit.

Viewed in itself, human nature does not become *one* with divinity, according to the Being. But along with divinity, “it also turns into godhead”; “it no longer remains in its boundaries and attributes.” However this is only happening after the Resurrection, and not through being,⁵⁶ but by divine grace, as uncreated energy of God.

CONCLUSION

Unlike what is usually believed, the tension between the mystical and the anti-mystical is not absent even from the Eastern Fathers. Like monasticism, mysticism is not a religious phenomenon peculiar to Christianity, and it is disputed whether it is essential to Christianity at all. But it can be characterized as a search for and experience of immediacy with God. The mystic is not content to know about God, he longs for union with God. ‘Union with God’ can mean different things, from literal identity, where the mystic loses all sense of himself and is absorbed into God, to the union that is experienced as the consummation of love, in which the lover and the beloved remain intensely aware both of themselves and of the other.⁵⁷ How the mystics interpret the way and the goal of their quest depends on what they think about God, and that itself is influenced by what they experience: it is a mistake to try to make out that all mysticism is the same.⁵⁸ Yet the search for God, or the ultimate, for His own sake, and an unwillingness to be satisfied with anything less than Him; the search for immediacy with this object of the soul’s longing: this would seem to be the heart of mysticism.⁵⁹

The model of Hindu ontological identity, Christianity opposes the model of personal transfiguration, through the continuous elongation of the person in God, realization possible only from the perspective of divine uncreated energies. God is not present with His being in the space that He created, but by plasticizing the reasons of creation, He constitutes the latter as an organic whole, harmonious in himself, which He sustains through His will. Unlike the ontological identity between God and the creature of Hindu perspective, the Christian mysticism of the Eastern Church postulates the eternally ontological difference between man and God.⁶⁰

In Hindu theology, the union with Brahman is given, but it must also be realized consciously through the salvific gnosis. The process of union in Hinduism is accomplished by removing the veil of ignorance (*māya*), that is, by knowing that the world is illusory, by the act of consciousness that man is essentially, always, identical to God. The knowledge (*jñāna*), obtained through meditative contemplation, is the path of mysticism in Hinduism. Once unity with God is given, it must only be consciously accomplished by removing the illusion that man would not be one with God-Brahman. The state of union is at the disposal of the ascetic, who has withdrawn from the world and lives only for contemplation.

⁵⁶ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Ascetics and Orthodox Mysticism*, vol. 2: *Mysticism*, p. 200.

⁵⁷ Andrew LOUTH, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition. From Plato to Denys*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. xiv.

⁵⁸ The literature on this subject is vast, but see in particular: R.C. ZAEHNER, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane. An Inquiry into some varieties of Praeternatural Experience*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, London, 1957.

⁵⁹ Andrew LOUTH, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*,

⁶⁰ Alexandru-Corneliu ARION, *Hindu pantheism and the Christian teaching on God*, p. 448.



The ultimate deification will consist, as Father Stăniloae has put it, into a look and experience of all the thought of and irradiated divine values and energies, to the ultimate measure of man, before Christ. But in doing so, in front of every human being, through the reasons and energies gathered within him, will be reflected the logoi (reasons) and energies of the Logos. That is why eternal happiness will consist in the contemplation of the face of Christ (Rev. 22. 4).⁶¹

The whole process can be synthesized by the statement of the St Maximus the Confessor:

“God has made us so that we may become partakers of the divine nature, so that we may enter into eternity in order to appear in likeness with Him, being deified by the grace that produces all the existing beings and calls to existence everything that does not exist.”⁶²

In this way, Christianity is uniquely established into a religion that, although it appears in history, transcends this history into a meta-history, because it is founded on the sacrifice of the Son of God Incarnate. This fully divine and human condition, at the same time, of his Founder, is absolutely specific to Christianity, and by this it is radically different not only from the Hindu religion, but also from any extra-Christian religious experience.

Finally, what we find in the Eastern Fathers undermines any tendency towards seeing mysticism as an elite, individualist quest for ‘peak’ experience; rather for them the ‘mystical life’ is the “life with Christ hid in God” of Colossians 3.3, a life which is ecclesial, that is lived in the Body of Christ, which is nourished liturgically, and which is certainly a matter of experience, though not of extraordinary “experiences”.⁶³ The mystical life, the ‘theoretical’ life, is what we experience when we are caught up in the contemplation of Christ, when, in that contemplation, we come to know ‘face to face’ and, as the Apostle Paul puts it, “know, even as I am known” (1 Cor. 13.12).

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⁶¹ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Ascetics and Orthodox Mysticism*, vol. 2, pp. 205-206.

⁶² Sf. MAXIM Mărturisitorul, *Epist. 43, Ad. Ioannem cubicularium*, P.G., t. 91, col. 640 B, apud Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 117.

⁶³ Andrew LOUTH, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, p. 213.



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