

# Mysticism (Part I) (Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



## Definition - Characteristics

The purpose of mysticism is an experiential, existential quest, direct relationship and spiritual union with God or the divine. This is sought with concentration, prayer, dispassion, contemplation and ecstasy. Mysticism is usually the intuitive element in the religious experience and manifests itself in almost all religions, from the primitive to the most highly-developed. Sometimes it springs up in the stony regions of external piety, giving fresh impetus to religious sentiment.



Because of the variety of forms it has assumed in the history of religions and the contradictory features it has been imbued with, there is no generally accepted definition. As a rule, mysticism, which expresses people's immediate relationship with and experience of the Numinous, differs from the arcane occult and from apocryphal beliefs and techniques.

The relationship between mysticism and organized religion appears to be uncomfortable, a mixture of respect and disbelief. Generally, it would be true to say that a genuinely religious person would have a streak of the mystic, and a mystic moved by experience of the Numinous is an intensely religious personality. Despite this, it would be wrong to confuse religiosity in general and mysticism. Religion is a much broader phenomenon. And, in any case, there are forms of non-religious mysticism.

There is no general agreement regarding the features of mysticism. W. R. Inge (1889) distinguished: a) internal knowledge; b) quietude; c) introspection; d) contempt for and neglect of material goods. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the characteristics of mysticism have generally been recognized as those noted by W. James (1902): 1. ineffability; 2. the noetic, since the mystic experience seeks a holistic concept of the universe, which certainly belongs to the noetic sphere; 3. passivity; and 4. transiency. More recently Louis Dupré (1987) has suggested the notion of the rhythmic in place of transiency, because this experience returns with a certain rhythm. He also adds integration as 5, explaining that the mystical conscience manages to transcend various contradictions by visualizing what joins them.

Many people claim that there is a common denominator which lies at the back of all forms of mysticism. Yet however many features can be identified in the mystical experience of different religious systems, there are also serious deviations, particular colourings. Every mystical experience retains something special, something personal.

Two distinct streams can be observed within religious mysticism: one, which we might call monist or of monist tendencies (Neoplatonist, the Hindu Advaita, Taoism); and the other which is deist and which evolved in the prophetic religions. In the first, the mystic experience culminates in the total disappearance of the human ego within the absolute Principle or divine Spirit. In the second, human personality is elevated and continues to be united to God. Depending on the extent of their participation by the mystics in the process of their return to God, mysticism manifests itself as active, contemplative or hesychast.

As regards the external features, we might distinguish:

1. The contemplative and intellectual forms of mysticism, in which a coherent unity is sought. Here, too, mild and extreme, extrovert and introvert, deist and non-deist types evolved.
2. Forms of devotion which stress the emotional element and seek to approach the Absolute through love.
3. Ecstatic and erotic forms, which provoke erotic sensations and stimuli. Sometimes the last two types overlap.

The mystical experience often develops in the human conscience the sense of universality and unity with all people. Usually, in the more spiritual forms of mysticism a peaceful, unifying attitude dominates. Mystical inspirations enliven the religious experience, judge and transcend traditional religious structures, and occasionally cast doubt upon and disconcert conventional external religiosity, though they are not free of dangerous aberrations.

### **Traces of mysticism in primitive cultures.**

The conviction that people can communicate with a supreme force, become familiar with it, transcend the limits of the body, unite with a divinity is to be found even as early as the primordial stages of religion and primitive cultures. Phenomena which lean towards mysticism manifest themselves in certain aspects of shamanism, which developed among the peoples of Northern Asia, Europe and America, as well as in the religious customs of the aborigines in Australia and America and the spirituality of various African nations. The conviction of the presence of a god in the shaman might be considered a mystical element of shamanism, the faith that during his ecstasy his soul leaves his body, to be united with God or, at least to stand before Him.

In any case, ecstasy, in which people have no awareness of external stimuli and are subject to exceptional experiences, has been known since the time of the worship of Dionysus and is present in many aboriginal religions in Africa and America. This condition in primitive religions is produced by a variety of means: narcotics, fasting, deafening music and orgiastic dances. Music and dance, in particular, intensified the psychodynamic forces, so that people could become familiar with the transcendental power or be united with a supreme spirit. Ecstasy usually posits a belief that people can be transformed and united to God. Of course, it is debatable how far these phenomena can be incorporated into religious

mysticism. They might, however, be a foretaste, a tendency towards, or traces of, mysticism, a hint of people's yearning for transcendental, mystical experiences.

## **Greek Mysticism**

Greek mysticism first developed, for the most part philosophically, in the *on one and all* teaching of the pre-Socratic philosophers and within the broader religious climate created by Dionysiac worship and the Orphic mysteries, with their ecstatic features. Initiates of Dionysus believed that they became "deified", while the Orphics looked towards a return to the divine essence through ecstasy. Greek philosophical cerebration dignified the original performances of unification with the divine in the Greek mysteries and in the place of the old rites cultivated the ecstasy which is caused mainly by meditation.

Amongst other things, the Greeks developed monism and pantheism, teaching that the world comes from one first Principle, to which it also returns. This concept was linked to the notion of the eternal recycling of beings and even to the theory of reincarnation. Plato (428/7-348/7 B. C.) further enriched Greek philosophical mysticism with the theory *concerning ideas*, while the Stoics offered the pantheistic-tending philosophy *concerning discourse*.

The most impressive mystical synthesis, however, occurred with Neo-Platonism, which expressed elements from Platonic, Aristotelian, Pythagorean and Stoic philosophy, probably fleshing out this amalgam with concepts from the Jewish hermeneutic tradition. Neo-Platonism was presented as an all-embracing philosophical system, spiritually uplifting and intellectually sound. Its founder was considered to be Ammonius Saccas (175-242), but it was Plotinus (206-269), who taught in Rome, who really shaped it.

It was further developed by Porphyry (232-303) and Iamblichus (245-330) in Syria and Proclus (411-485) in Athens. For Neo-Platonism, the principle and source of the cosmos is the One, the First, the Eternal, the Sublime, the Good, which is identified with God. The cosmos came about from an emanation from the One, which was achieved in successive phases. The first emanation is the *intellect*, which consists of ideas which correspond to the Platonic intelligible world; second is the *world soul*; third is *individual souls*; and fourth is *matter*, which is farthest removed from the One. In Plotinus' philosophy, each emanation from the One reflects its original as an image. This means much more than an external copy; each sphere of reality corresponds, at the depths of its essence, to a higher one and has to return to it. Neo-Platonist mysticism is linked to this metaphysic, particularly to the theory of emanation.

The human soul has to pass through the frontiers of the senses, of material and to commune with the One, the Absolute. The final union is accomplished through ascetic cleansing and ecstasy, which leads to the mystical contemplation of the divine. Plotinian union with the one has been called ecstatic but really it is more invasive (an intrusion into the self). Plotinus incorporated into his system the four basic virtues of Platonic ethics- wisdom, courage, restraint and justice- simply as conditions. What he looked to principally as the supreme goal, as eudaimonia (faring well, happiness) and good, was the mystical union of the soul and God. Amalgamation with the One may, according to Neo-Platonism, be achieved even in this earthly, human life. Both Plotinus and Porphyry claimed to have had such an experience. Neo-Platonism was a major competitor of Christianity and, in the confrontation, certain ideas were re-shaped by Christian mystics.

## **Chinese mysticism**

One of the most ancient mystical systems sprang up and flourished in China. Its theoretical foundations are to be found in the ancient philosophical axioms of Laozi and the apophthegms of the poetry of Zhuangzi. The basic holy book of Taoism, the *Dao De Jing*, which is attributed to Laozi (6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) defines a policy of ascetic practices with many mystical tendencies. The highest reality, the Tao, is defined with contradictory phrases and apophatic language. It is unseeable, unintelligible, formless, perfect, unchanging, impersonal, fills everything and is the source of everything. It existed before all the ages, before the earth and the heavens. It is the first principle of the universe. Taoism, then, has a monistic tendency, which sees absolute unity in the universe.

The Taoist concept of the creation is that from the Tao came the One, that is the

great Monad, and from the first two essences “yang” and “yin”, positive and negative, came all created things. Yang and yin represent and embrace all the major oppositions: light-dark, masculine-feminine and so on. Finally, these gave birth to the heavens, the earth, people; all created things came from them. The Tao is not only the absolute source of all existence, but, at the same time, keeps all the phenomena of creation in harmony. Its energy is necessary and automatic. It constitutes the highest human goal. People have to seek their self-abandonment in the Tao. Basically, the means for this harmonization are quietude, impassivity, the return to primary simplicity.

The basic position propounded by Taoism (the well-known *wu-wei*) might be summarized as an exhortation to “do nothing” or “do anything doing nothing”. In order for people to achieve synchronization with the Tao and to be in harmony with external things, the Taoist tradition prescribed a mystical procedure: the first stage purification; the second enlightenment- when virtue no longer needs conscious effort but is spontaneous; and the third, internal unity. Each person has the potential to draw closer to the Tao. Taoism proclaimed contempt for riches, pleasures and accumulation of knowledge, and formed an outlook diametrically opposed to the corresponding one in classical Confucianism.

The work of Tao Ling (1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century A. D), gave Taoism a clearer external structure. Many monasteries were founded (for men and women, and very similar in many ways to those of the Buddhists), as well as temples, which housed a variety of images of different divinities. Apart from this development, Chinese mysticism manifests characteristic similarities to Neo-Platonism, with which it agrees both as regards the issue of ultimate unity, which is inaccessible to knowledge and can be achieved with intuition, elevation and ecstasy, as well as in the view that the absolute Principle cannot be identified with all or part of the material universe.

## **Hindu Mysticism**

Throughout their history, Indians have been distinguished for their intense mystical leanings. Hinduism is pervaded by a introverted mystical tendency in most of its aspects, both philosophical and metaphysical facets, as well as liturgical displays which border on Shamanism and magic. The quest for the first Principle makes its first appearance even as early as some of the text of the Vedas (such as the hymn of creation). From the emphasis on the importance of sacrifice sprang the word Brahman, which, in the beginning denoted the sacred power which is present in sacrifice, and later came to mean the Absolute.

It was principally the Upanishads, however, which collected the scattered material of Indian intellectual mysticism and provided a rippling spring which watered the following centuries. They claimed that the Brahman included all things- everything that did and did not exist- and that it is in all and above all, beyond any definition, a sublime, impersonal Principle. At the same time as the concept of Brahman, the teaching about atman developed, which is the invisible part of human existence. In the next phase, Indian thought would equate the One and only Brahman with the Atman. The relationship between the cosmic soul of all and the personal soul of each person is similar to that which Plotinus described later.

It is mainly from the Upanishads that one of the most typical forms of mysticism stems, which, to a great extent, coincides with polytheist monism. It developed philosophically from the Vedanta, one of the six orthodox, philosophical, religious systems of Hinduism, and especially from the branch known as Advaita. The non-Hindu school of Advaita Vedanta was formed philosophically, as we have seen, mainly by Adi Shankara (788-820), who supported the idea of the non-reality of the world, the non-duality of Brahman and the non-existence of any difference between Atman and Brahman.

According to this system, there is only one stable reality, Brahman, who is immanent in people as atman. The atman is not the equivalent of what is called the soul in Greek philosophy. It is the stable, the unalterable, which remains when what we think, what we want, what we feel are all taken away. With the vision and knowledge which can come from mystical experience, people can realize their identity with the supreme Brahman, crying aloud: "You are that" (*tat tvam asi*), that is, "Your spirit is one with the whole, you are the whole". The elimination of the personality and the union of the individual atman with Brahman is redemption. The spiritual existence of people, a drop in the ocean, returns, after various transformations and transmigrations of the soul, after the vicissitudes of *samsara*, to its supreme and absolute source. But for anyone to advance along this mystical path, what is required is asceticism, setting aside the desires and, above all, knowledge acquired through intense mental self-concentration.

The other type of mysticism which developed in India was connected to dualism and supported philosophically by another great orthodox Hindu school, the Sankhya. This claims that there are two different principles, *prakriti*, the material principle, the source of energy, and *purusa*, separate spiritual entities. The latter may and should be liberated from matter in a systematic effort of self-concentration, in a mystical self-isolation. This mysticism does not lead to the comingling with a transcendent being, is not related to pantheistic monism but

leads, rather, to absolute individualism.

A third direction of Indian mysticism has an intensively deist character; its roots lie in the famous mystical poem the *Bhagavad Gita*. The narrative here concerning Krishna presupposes a deist attitude. The proposal is for a synthesis of the contemplative and active life, uniting monism and a deist trend. It urges intellectual discipline, calmness, and detachment, through which even the most active of people will be able to discern the presence of the eternal in all things. This poem, which culminates in the vision and drama of Krishna, ends with the advice that people should seek God with devotion to Him, rather than submersion in the self. This exalts *bhakti*, the way of devotion to a personal divinity.

This type of devotional mysticism was established principally by Ramanuja (1017-1137) and the school he founded. According to this, there are three absolute principles: God, souls and matter. God is the only autonomous reality, both of the soul and of matter. In the place of the impersonal Absolute, Ramanuja again sets the traditional concept of a personal God, who assists the soul on its path to redemption. Instead of a cold intellectual, metaphysical quest, he advocates an experiential attitude of devotion.

This fertile philosophical ground was tapped by erotic mysticism, which flourished in India as devotion (*bhakti*). The Indian emotional type of mysticism attained a hysterical charge and boost in the mysticism of Chaitanya (1486-1534) and his supporters, as well as in the sentimentality of certain other Hindu heresies. Bhakti religious feeling was at its peak in the second millennium and continues to influence Hindu spirituality to this day.