

Mysticism (Part II) (Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Buddhist Mysticism

Since mysticism is the immediate, intuitive relationship with the Absolute, it would be possible to claim, insisting on this strict definition, that there is no such thing as Buddhist mysticism., because, in the classic forms of this religion, there is no acceptance of the existence of the Absolute. Unlike the prophetic religions, whose message is defined by the word, Buddhism, as a religion of silence, rejects all ways of naming the Absolute, while, in depth, it allows it to seem that it accepts an ineffable Absolute, which it identifies with emptiness. Promoting the idea of “anatman”-“anatta” (not-self), sets as an ideal the achievement of “nirvana”. But even if it denies a real, positive Absolute, it accepts an absolute goal.



Buddhist descent and dissolution into emptiness might be considered a *sui generis* mystical experience, corresponding to the commingling with the one in the Advaita of Hinduism, or to Neo-Platonism. It is also indicative that the final aim of Buddhism, nirvana, is described in apophatic terms, of course, though with mystical phrases borrowed from Hinduism. Finally, in the practice of worship, when Buddhists give thanks to the nameless source of every fondness and kindness, they are tacitly, subconsciously harmonizing with an unconfessed faith in the existence of a beneficent Absolute.

The mystical tendency also developed in accordance with the particular theoretical concepts in the three branches of Buddhism. In the Hinayana “vehicle”, the elements are presented in a more understated way, but become clearer in the last three stages of the noble eightfold path and are linked to contemplation, intense mental concentration and self-immersion (*samadhi*), which thereafter is achieved with eight more successive forms of intellectual exercise, *dhyana*.

In the end, it is a conviction which is directed towards some mystical experience. Via this path, the Buddhist is brought to knowledge, enlightenment and nirvana, through this own efforts.

Mahayana Buddhism opened new horizons for this mystical experience, which leads to the boundless void. This teaching concerning the absolute emptiness (*sunyata*), which was developed philosophically by Nagarjuna (end of the 2nd century A.D.) and promoted by the Madhyamaka school, transcends all concepts

related to the notions of being and non-being. Nevertheless, it has a clear soteriological intent and aims to root out entirely the possibility of desire, and to lead to total emptiness. Whereas the idea of the void is manifested in the Hinayana schools as a basic quality of the final aim, of nirvana, the emphasis in Mahayana extends to the preparatory stages, too. Because absolute reality is vacant, empty of any distinction, entirely undefined. Liberation from this illusion which the world creates is attained by rooting out all personal capacity or desire, and with knowledge- which here does not mean scientific training and knowledge but almost the opposite of conceptual ability: knowledge gained through intense mystical silence.

Within the context of Mahayana Buddhism, trends also developed towards mystical devotion, such as Amidism, which is rather similar to the bhakti religiousness of Hinduism. The followers of Amida seek redemption by fixing their thoughts on this heavenly Buddha. The Buddhist Zen branch, however, with absolute consistency in the search for emptiness, cultivated determined meditation, mental exercise, for emergence from conventional logic into immediate experience and enlightenment. But this plunge into emptiness, as it appears in Zen Buddhism, does not lead to a withdrawal from the present life but to an elevated ability to tackle anything in this life, free from passion and attachment. Not every form of Zen in Buddhism is necessarily mystical, however, any more than every form of yoga in Hindu religious practice or asceticism in Neo-Platonism.

In Vajrayana Buddhism, which was also called esoteric, as it evolved in Tibet, complicated teachings were developed with a tendency towards mystico-ecstasy. For the achievement of enlightenment, in particular, compound mystical knowledge, intense contemplation, yoga exercises, erotic symbolism and, especially ecstasy with secret rites and psychosomatic stimulation were cultivated. In general, within the various labyrinthine directions and teachings which developed in Buddhism, there is clearly the possibility of direct contact with the Ineffable, while paths were methodically marked, mystical in their composition, which lead to absorption, to the absolute silence of nirvana.

Jewish mysticism

Of the variety of forms of mysticism produced by Judaism, some developed deeply meditative systems, others cultivated intensely emotional kinds of mystical experience, but generally Jewish mysticism is distinguished for its vivid eschatological orientation. From as early as the first century A. D., many elements of Greek philosophical mysticism infiltrated, with the allegorical interpretation developed by Philo the Alexandrian (ca. 15/10 B.C. – 50 A.D.)

The early phase of Jewish mysticism, the Merkabah, centred on the vision of Ezekiel concerning the chariot throne. It began in the 1st century, adopting a system of spiritual exercises which led to the vision of the glory of God seated on a heavenly throne. In this form of mysticism there appear influences from Gnostic concepts, to do with “completion” and even Hellenistic combinations of magic and mysticism. This type, also known as Southern Judaism, gave emphasis to contemplation and meditation. It declined after the 7th century, but saw a revival in Italy in the 9th and 10th.

Medieval Hasidism, that is “piety” (hasid = pious), often referred to as Northern, began in the 12th century in Germany, as a folk movement closely linked to the law (halakhah). It is characterized by a vivid eschatological feel, which became more intense as it developed, emphasis on simplicity, lack of passion, spiritual values, prayer, spiritual exercise, and immersion in divine love. Hasidic theology displays certain features in common with Neo-Platonism and was interested, on an intellectual level, in the glory of God (kabodh), stressing that the glory is different from the essence, the kingdom and the hidden presence of God.

The most important mystical Jewish trend was kabbalah, which was developed in Spain in the 13th century as a special, esoteric teaching and, thereafter, after the Jews were expelled in 1492, it spread to a large part of the Jewish world. Its theoretical system has been influenced by theological and cosmological concepts of a Gnostic type, while at the same time it absorbed Neo-Platonic ideas which had spread to the Jewish and Arab culture of Spain in the 12th and 13th centuries.

The fundamental work of kabbalah, *Zohar* (Splendour, Radiance), which was written in Spain in an attempt to stem the rationalist tide, gave traditional Judaism a secret, mystic energy. Its central teaching concerns the 10 sefirot, which exist between the timeless God and His creations, the 10 areas into which the divine extends itself. This “fullness” of the sefirot does not flow out from God, but remains within Him. *Zohar* stressed ritual symbolism, interpreting rites as mystical points of contact between the divine and the human, while generally reinforcing Jewish self-awareness, eventually arriving at the point where it taught that Jews had a quality

of soul that non-Jews lacked.

In Kabbalah, a more prophetic trend also evolved, the main voice for this being Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia (1240-1291), who, combining many elements of the philosophical theories of Maïmonides (1135/8-1204), aimed at loosing the soul from the bonds which held it to the world of diversity and facilitating its return to the initial unity. In order to achieve this goal, it was recommended, in particular, that an abstract object be gazed upon or contemplated, e.g. the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The elevation of the consciousness to a higher state of unity with God also developed the human prophetic capability.

In the 16th century, in Palestine, certain Jewish mystics, exiled from Spain, gave kabbalah a Messianic, eschatological direction. One of the teachings of this school, the most important representative of which was Isaac Luria (1534-1572), emphasizes that with prayer and piety in general, the mystic contributes actively to the restoration of the original order of the universe.

In the 18th century, a new Hasidism developed in Poland, more emotional than intellectual, and which was rather more of a movement of renewal than a new theological school. It began with Besht (Yisroel ben Eliezer, 1700-1760) and his disciple Dov Ber. Rejecting messianic hyperbole, he adopted many elements of the mystical piety of kabbalah. More practical and social, he stressed the moral life, the joyous spirit which springs from a mystical, esoteric experience. Reacting against the trend of the intellectuals of rabbinic Judaism in the Ukraine and Southern Poland, it stressed the worth of the ordinary Jew. Starting with the Kabbalistic teachings related to divine emanations within creation, it gave greater emphasis to the internal attitude of people, to their attachment to God, rather than the intellectual elaboration and understanding of tradition. Although it retained its special identity by forming self-sustaining communities, Hasidism gradually distanced itself from Kabbalistic influence and became part of the Jewish mainstream (Ashkenazi) of Central and Eastern Europe. After World War Two, Hasidic groups fled to America.

Despite the multiplicity and external influences which affected it at times, Jewish mysticism retained its own dynamic unity, based on the Old Testament, the dominance of the word and eschatological expectation.

Islamic Mysticism -Sufism

The aim and effort of the Muslim mystics, the Sufi, was the transcendence of individuality, eradication of the ego, total submission to Allah and loving adherence

to God. The early Sufi adopted the models of asceticism and spirituality of the Christian hermits in the desert. The woollen garment, the suf, from which their name probably derives, recalls this influence. To a large extent, Islamic mysticism could be called erotic. Many of the texts of the Sufi display an astonishing resemblance to the spirit, and even the expression, of contemporary mystics in Western Christianity.

During the first period of Sufism, the expression of divine love was restrained in nature and in harmony with the atmosphere of the Koran and the Hadith. It later acquired its own impulsion and passion. In this first, erotic mysticism, the dominant figure was Rabi^ca al-^cAdawiya (died 801 A.D.). With erotic devotion to God, he was uninterested in any reward, worry or fear. One of the most beautiful prayers of the mystics is the famous: "If I worship you out of fear of Hell, cast me into the fire of Hell. And if I worship you in the hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise. But if I worship you simply for Your own sake, do not deprive me of Your eternal beauty".

The Neo-Platonic categories adopted by some of the leading lights of Sufism reinforced the mystical movement in Islam theoretically, but also encouraged the evolution of a form of monism within it. Views of Plotinus were adopted by al-Junayd (died 910 A.D.), but with his genius and prudence, he remained within Islamic orthodoxy. In this world, as long as the mystic is uplifted and united to God, the mystic is full of joy. With Junayd, the mystical theology of the Sufi reached maturity and systematic unity.

The established bounds of Muslim religiosity were transcended in an explosion of ecstatic experience by al-Hallaj (died 922 A.D.). Starting with the certainty that God is love and that He created people in His image, he emphasized that people had to discover within themselves the divine image and attain to unity with God. Some of his ideas, such as "I am the truth" (which probably expressed a passing identity with God, granted from above), caused indignation among orthodox Muslims and he was condemned to crucifixion. After this sentence, the Sufi became more careful in their statements and more enigmatic in their expressions. Erotic terminology was the most dynamic means of expression for them. With the assistance of a series of exercises, which led to ecstatic states, this love attained the certainty of unity with God, so much so that the Muslim mystics desired to melt in divine love.

The majority of Muslim ascetics showed respect for the basic tenets of Islam. Some extreme statements and practices of the Sufi, however, created great suspicion among the representatives of traditional Islam. The opposition erupted into an open clash in the 10th century, but the gap between Sunni Islam and Sufism was bridged in the 11th by al-Ghazali (died 1111 A.D.). Having sought the Absolute

through asceticism and mystical experience, he came to the conclusion that this was not acquired through theoretical appraisal, but rather is experienced in personal change and ecstasy. He placed experience above the letter of the law and established orthodox Muslim mysticism, bringing awe of God back to the centre of Islamic piety and harmony to the relationship between theology and mystical experience.

The couplets of Jalal al-din al-Rumi (died 1273 A.D.) remain among the most popular books of the Sufi. The dervishes consider these books holy and place them next to the Koran. His texts, full of images and powerful ideas, expressed in beautiful poetic language, defined the later course of Islamic mysticism.

With Ibn ^cArabi (died 1240 A.D.) the dependence on Neo-Platonism became more active, as did the movement towards monism. Al-Arabi, who together with al-Gazali is considered the most philosophical of the Sufi, did not abandon pictorial erotic language and attempted to complete his Neo-Platonic vision with the Koran's teaching concerning people and God. God always transcends creation, but through people's mediation the created world can return to its initial unity. In the end, his teachings testify to dogmatic indifference and tend towards pan-theistic concepts.

The Sufi reacted to the conventional piety of the *status quo* in a manner which was silent, experiential and often moving. After the 12th century, the Sufic mystical current led to the creation of Muslim monastic communities (tariqa). Many who sought mystical experiences went to an elder who would undertake to guide them, the basic element of this apprenticeship being not so much cognitive education, but spiritual and psychological development. This process demanded an organized community and each of these developed their own centres, where members lived according to their own rules, principles, secrets and spiritual atmosphere. This is not to say that all members could be considered mystics. Nevertheless, within their own atmosphere they cultivated the mystical experience, with care and anticipation. Among the best known instances were the Dervishes, who with ritual dances and other means sought ecstasy in order to approach God. As the Dervish orders spread to other areas, the mystical disposition and life reached all strata of the Islamic world and the search for mystical elation and visions took on greater dimensions. Today there is new interest in a revival of Sufism.

Christian Mysticism

In General

Christianity did not identify sanctity and its ideal with the achievement of mystical

elation. But the fact of the incarnation of the Divine Word makes our communion and union with God, Who is unapproachable, both ontologically and existentially possible. The roots of Christian mysticism are to be found in the New Testament, especially in the texts by Saint John the Evangelist and Saint Paul the Apostle. The Christian experience always had *Holy Scripture* as its starting point, its motive force and criterion. The basic Christian mystical currents flow from Johannine theology: the mysticism of the divine “image, which tends towards “likeness” and the mysticism of love. Christ Himself, after emphasizing that “I am in the Father and the Father in me” (*Jn.* 14, 11), stressed to His disciples: “you have remained in me and I in you and “he who remains in me and I in him” (15, 4-5). But at the same time, he underlined that the road towards this loving union is not emotional or, much less a mystico-ecstatic escape, but rather harmonization with His own life: “Those who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father and I will love them and show myself to them” (14, 21). Many passages in the New Testament refer to the need and the importance of being “in Christ”. Saint Paul’s epistles are charged with mystical experience which turns on the axis of “I do not live at all, but Christ lives in me” (*Gal.* 2, 20).

John’s disciple, Ignatios the God-Bearer (†113/4) expresses a profound mystical experience in writing to the Romans that “my love is crucified”. The first attempt at theoretical systemization of Christian mysticism was made by Origen (185-254), who developed the theology of the image of God in people. The emphasis on the ontological nature of this image (which is not merely an external copy) has remained throughout Christian tradition and provides it with its solid mystical force. Although Origen himself saw the pinnacle of spiritual perfection as contemplation and knowledge, his theology is distinguished from the Neo-Platonic by the privileged position he accorded to love. He was also the first to speak of Divine erotic love: “The soul is a bride wooed by the Word”.

As the centuries passed, Christian mysticism took on different forms, of which the most prominent were: 1 hesychast contemplation; 2 emotional erotic devotion, centred on the person of Jesus Christ (various mystics of the Roman Catholic Church; 3) reflection and contemplative prayer (Carmelites and Ignatians; and 4) worship which promotes the liturgical and sacramental life for elevation and union with God. In many instances, one feature might dominate, without the others being absent, and forms which combine them are not infrequent.

From time to time, mention is made of influences from Neo-Platonist mysticism on Christianity. The differences, however, remain very telling. For example: 1) the

Christian Church insists on, and the mysticism which evolved within its context adopts the position that the cosmos, souls and matter, are creations of God, not emanations from Him; 2) Christian mysticism utterly rejects the union of the human soul with God as a pantheistic notion; 3) Mysticism is conceived not in terms of union with the divine essence, but as vision of divine glory, as a union of love, as participation in the uncreated energies of God, with which people arrive at "deification", become "God by grace"; and 4) whereas in Neo-Platonic mysticism, what is stressed is the union of the soul with the absolute One, principally through ascetic purification and ecstasy, in Christianity the dominant feeling is that, since God is love, the only successful path towards union between us and God is love. The mystical Christian current flows from the springs of divine revelation and is forever being renewed by them.

After these general observations, we shall attempt a sketch of Christian mysticism in the Western world, and, at the end, the evolution of Orthodox mysticism, which engages us more closely, with a note of its basic themes and characteristics.

Western Christian mysticism

Western Christendom was heavily influenced by Saint Augustine (354-430), who spoke of the divine image, principally in psychological terms, starting with the relationship between Creator and creation, which divine attraction and our response to it is transformed into identity. Johannes Scotus Eriugena (810-877), adopting Neo-Platonist philosophy and translating the writings which bear the name of Dionysios the Areopagite, then imbued early medieval mysticism with fresh vigour. The mystics of the West took little notice of the mysticism of the image and turned more to a private and emotional mysticism, in this way shaping Christian erotic mysticism.

Among the most outstanding eulogizers of spiritual erotic love was Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). His love was Christocentric, fixed firmly on the crucified Christ. In the 13th century, a new concept of the importance of the incarnation of the Word was developed as well as of the significance the whole of creation has after this. Since then, the presence of God has been sought more within creation than outside it.

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) taught his contemporaries to treat nature with respect and love, and to behave in similar fashion towards poor and sick people. The vivid awareness of the unique importance of the fact that God became human gave Christian erotic mysticism sensitivity to human pain and interest in social developments. Many Western mystics, such as Saint Catherine of Sienna (1347-

1380) and Ignatius Loyala (1491-1556), lived active lives and had an effect on society at large.

Medieval mysticism reached great heights with Johannes (Meister) Eckhart (1260-1327) who is considered the most important mystical theologian of the West. He wove Augustinian and Greek theories together in a daring, apophatic theology and created an imposing system, centred on the theology of the ontology of the image, taking the mysticism of the image to its farthest limits. People need to acquire awareness of the divine element which exists within them. The new birth of Christ within the innermost portion of the soul is the purpose of the history of salvation. Eckhart insists that mystical union is not the prerogative of certain people only, but a basic inclination and the final goal of humankind. In order to achieve it, however, an intellectual process will not suffice; what is required is withdrawal from worldly things and rejection of them. These ideas were simplified by Johannes Tauler (?1300-1361), preaching a personal, experiential Christianity. The Dutchman Jan van Ruysbroek (1293-1381) included a mysticism of creation in the mysticism of the image.

Among the most typical representatives of the erotic mysticism of the West were the Spaniards, Saint Theresa of Avilla (1515-1582) and Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591). The latter, who was also Saint Theresa's spiritual guide, described the spiritual life as increasing purification- a path which begins with the night of the sensations, proceeds to thoughtful understanding and ends in the darkness of union with God. Other mystics described the second and third stages as enlightenment and union respectively, while Theresa refers to the mystical loving union as marriage, and described four stages which lead to God: concentration, combined with prayer; quiet prayer; unifying prayer, in which the will and intellect are united with God; ecstatic union (*unio mystica*). These teachings have influenced more broadly the romantic mysticism of recent times and cultivated a mystical disposition of reflective, emotional and ecstatic prayer.

Mystical communities also spread through the sphere of the Protestant communities which were formed after the Reformation. The first was represented by Valentin Weigel (1533-1588), who combined traditional ideas from Gnosticism and Paracelsus in an all-embracing system. The second current had its origins with Jakob Böhme (1575-1624). At first it met with serious opposition, but later influenced German spirituality when mystic-ecstatic piety developed. In the Anglo-Saxon World, a notable mystic was George Fox (1624-1691), founder of the Quakers. As German idealism evolved, and with Friedrich Schleiermacher, mysticism attracted the attention of theology. Later, Rudolf Otto noted the profound relationship between the mystical experience and the essence of religion.